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ARGOSY

SEPTEMBER, 1956

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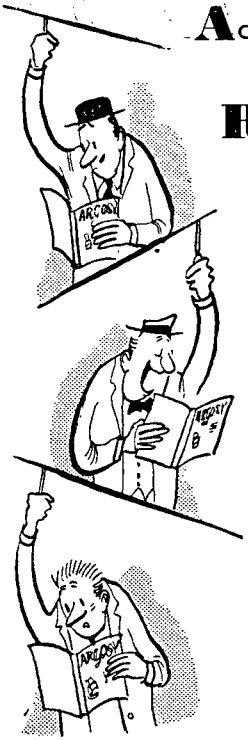

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ARGOSY

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Printed in England by PERCY BROTHERS, LTD., THE HOTSPUR PRESS, MANCHESTER, and published on the 10th of each month by THE AMALGAMATED PRESS, LTD., The Fleetway House, Farringdon Street, London, E.C.4. Registered for Transmission by Canadian Magazine Post. Subscription Rates: Inland, £1 8s. for 12 months, 14s. for 6 months. Overseas: except Canada, £1 6s. 6d. for 12 months, 13s. 3d. for 6 months. Canada: £1 5s. 6d. for 12 months, 12s. 9d. for 6 months. ADVERTISEMENT OFFICES: Tallis House, Tallis Street, London, E.C.4. Sole Agents: Australasia, Messrs. GORDON & GOTCH, LTD.; South Africa, CENTRAL NEWS AGENCY, LTD.; Federation of Rhodesia and Nyasaland, Messrs. KINGSTONS, LTD.

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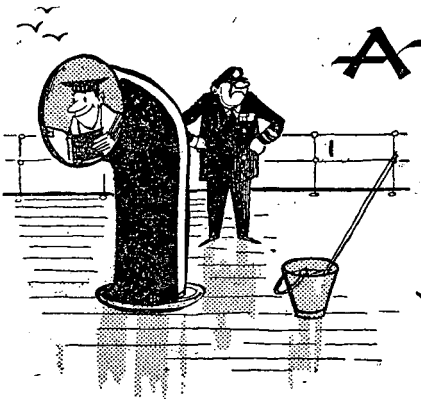

ARGOSY Log Book

NOWADAYS in some of the hubs of civilization it's possible to pick up the telephone, dial **WEA**ther, and be told sympathetically that it will rain before you leave the office. We assume therefore that ships' crow's-nests are becoming more and more deserted, except, of course, by such matelots as prefer to do their reading undisturbed. No more of that "Avast, there, Cap'n! Hurricane coming up on the starb'd bow." Instead, somebody rings up the nearest capital city and asks for le **TEM**ps, or das **WET**ter, as the case may be.

This telephone service is an excellent idea, we feel, and could well be developed in other directions. There is already a culinary exchange in Vienna, which supplies menus and telephonic advice to distracted cooks when the steak is beginning to give off blue smoke. Even more soothing and salutary would be a scheme whereby, on dialling **ARG**osy, the luxurious subscriber, sinking back, would hear the operator say, "You're through now." "Hullo, Argosy reader," a velvety voice would purr, "here is the latest sizzling exploit of Dr. Dakobra, the Spy King . . ."

In the meantime, Argosy is excellent reading on a rainy day.

Readers were so enthusiastic in their response to our "Title This Story" competition—see page 90 for results—that we are now offering a two-guinea prize for the best *subtitle* for the story on page 55. Remember that a good subtitle must intrigue the reader without giving away the plot, and should not be more than about a dozen words in length. Send entries *on a postcard*, by September 10, to The Editor, Argosy, The Fleetway House, London E.C.4.

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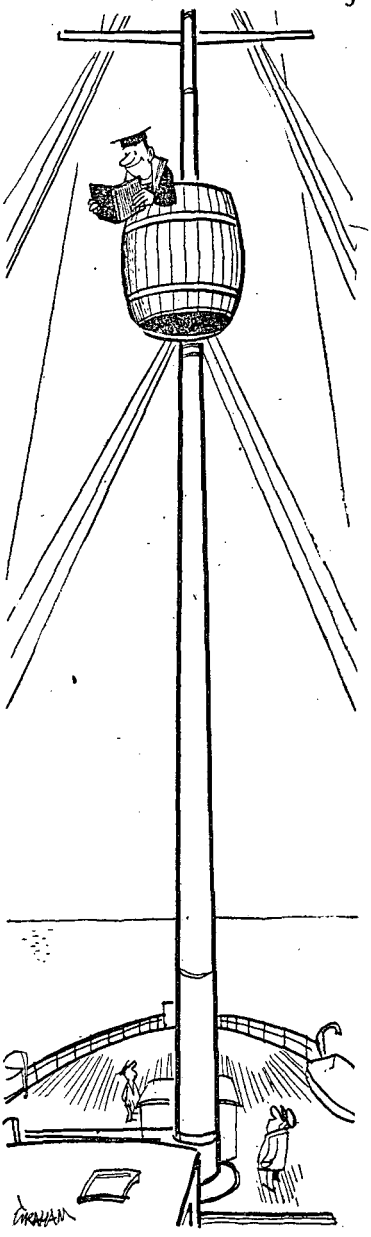
H. E. Bates left school at seventeen, fired with determination to become a writer; he read everything he could lay his hands on, left a job on a local paper for one in a leather warehouse which gave him more time to write, and had his first novel, *The Two Sisters*, published when he was twenty-one. Since then he has had over eighteen volumes of fiction published. Among his best known books are *Fair Stood the Wind for France* and *The Purple Plain*. His short stories are richly atmospheric, frequently about the English countryside. *The Sleepless Moon*, his last novel, has just come out. His new story on page 30 has the brilliance of a sudden ray of sunshine in a thundery landscape.

Ray Bradbury has a unique gift for combining poetry and science fiction in equal proportions. Now in his thirties, he is married with a family. Widely published in America, South Africa, Sweden, he has had dozens of stories in Argosy. His method of writing is unusual: from 7.30 a.m. to 5.30 p.m. he is at work on about twenty stories at once, turning from one to another as the mood takes him. His latest collection, *The October Country*, has just come out over here.



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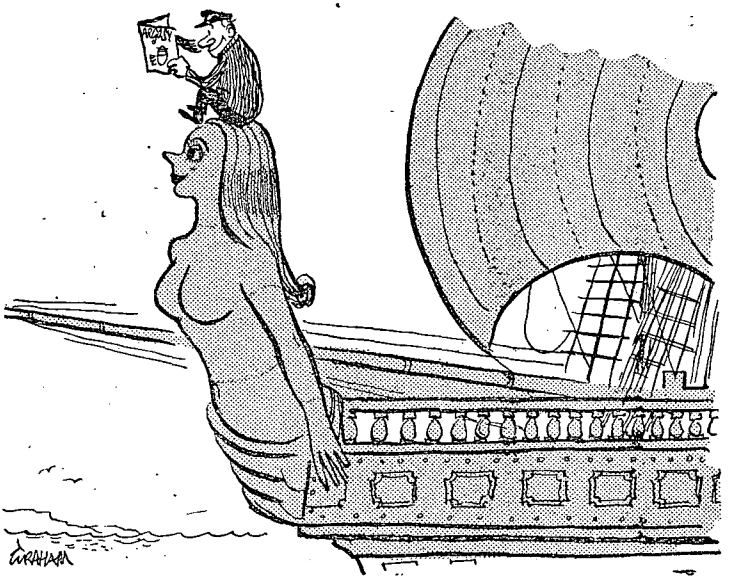
E. Crandall, author of our long complete novel on page 107, was born in Brooklyn, studied at University College, Oxford. From 1923 to 1948 played many leading parts on the New York stage in plays such as *Young Woodley* and Maugham's *Our Betters*. Now he writes plays, novels, and TV scripts.

John Collier is English, married to an American wife, has lived in Hampshire, Oxfordshire, and Virginia, U.S.A. He began his literary life by writing poetry and won a poetry prize in 1922. His first novel—*His Monkey Wife, or, Married to a Chimp* (a satire)—was published in 1930. Perhaps his best known work is *Defy the Foul Fiend*, a novel that has been compared to *Candide*; he has also produced several collections of short stories—*Green Thoughts, No Traveller Returns, The Devil and All.* The devil is one of his favourite characters and has turned up in several of his most popular Argosy stories—remember *Thus I Refute Beelzy* ?

John Kruse knows what he is talking about when he writes of underwater fishing, for he acted as cameraman in the filming of Gregory Peck's *Moby Dick*, engineering genuine sequences of whale-hunting by the old-fashioned method of hand harpooning. In real life as well as in his fiction he is seldom far from some large, fierce, underwater prey . . .

JOHN SILVER



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GOLDEN FOUNTAINS

The blood-red jets soared up in their flaring glory

BY CHRISTOPHER LANDON

THE only way to work it was to get a permanent job there. A man who had come as far as he had would have no use for any living thing that was not of use to him. I could make myself useful. I was strong and tough, and could throw a knife or pull a gun faster than most. That was what he might need over and above his band of secretaries. You cannot become a multimillionaire in fifteen short years without making many new enemies.

The interview was arranged by bribing a valet to let me see the under-secretary, who for a consideration allowed me to see the principal secretary, who was "accommodated" into allocating me five minutes in the presence. I remember walking down the soft-carpeted corridor of the floor of the hotel that was now his empire, being passed from hand to hand, wondering all the time how it could possibly be worth while to lead that kind of existence —how could one sleep when one dare not trust a soul?

I was shown in by the chief shark. "The person who wished to see you, sir . . ." and there he was, sitting behind a huge desk in a great, gleaming room.

The name hadn't registered, and he didn't recognize me. Why should he when he had only seen me once fifteen years ago? The snake's eyes were still there, but he was fat and white and soft now. He looked at his watch—I can remember how the black hairs stood out against the pale flesh—and said I had exactly five minutes. He did not ask me to sit down.

I said, "I thought you might be wanting someone to keep you free from bother. A sort of chest-protector."

"Why?"

"Well, someone like you—who's gone a long way—must be bothered sometimes. And a secretary might not be strong enough or quick enough to cope."

"But why you?" he said. "Why you?" And as he said it,

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he looked at me as if I were a bit of offal. "I employ only the best."

I thought of showing him by slipping that little knife from my wrist-sheath and slinging it into the wall within an inch of his left ear, but I held my tongue and kept my temper. "The best may not think the way you or I do. They were not born in Lemnos."

He shifted in his chair then and I don't think he liked being reminded of the beginning, but all he said was, "What village?" And when I told him, he did not deny it. He stared hard at me and said, "Somehow the face is familiar. How old are you?"

"Twenty-five."

He shrugged. "Then we cannot have met: I left before you were ten."

"I saw you once," I said, "though I don't think you noticed me."

He was silent a moment, staring at me. I knew exactly what he was thinking: blackmail—how much did I know—would it be cheaper to take me on? What could he find out about me? The last was my least worry. Fifteen years is quite a long time.

At last he said softly, "So you would like to look after my interests?"

I nodded.

There was a pause and those eyes were still on me, only there was something in them now that I did not quite understand. Then he said, "Do you understand anything about dreams?"

I thought there was a catch. "No, sir. I don't touch that sort of thing. Only facts."

He didn't say anything; just pressed a bell and, when the secretary came in, said that I was to start in the morning at ten pounds a week, plus expenses, nine till six, and sit in the outer office. He did not look at me again.

The chair in that office was hard, and I didn't have to move from it much. The first week I had to bounce two disgruntled and uninfluential customers; the second was mainly concerned with the rather shady pay-off of a girl from one of the cafés near the harbour. But I was not bored. It was pleasant to be able to sit there hour after hour and think about things.

Then one night he sent for me.

It was late and I was just going off duty. He was sitting at that desk again, still, composed. But under that façade of the grey suit and the silk shirt, the manicure and the barbering, I knew—knew so certainly from the moment I saw him—that things were not too good. Above all, that he was not sleeping.

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This time he asked me to sit down. There was a decanter of whisky and glasses on a side table, and he made a motion to me to help myself, but I shook my head and said that I did not drink in working-hours.

" So, you know nothing of dreams? " He was not looking at me; he stared at the blotter in front of him while he fiddled with a jade paper-knife.

" No, sir. Only facts, as I told you."

He said, almost grumblingly, " But all the people of our Island do."

" I've never had time for that."

" Tell me—since you left the Island, what have you done? "

I told him of my travels: how I had been round the world three times, of the two dozen jobs; that I had never been able to settle down until I came to this city, and how I had seen his name in the papers, and remembered, and hoped that I might be of some service to him.

" In your travels," he said suddenly, " have you ever seen three golden fountains? "

" No, sir."

" It is always at night." His voice went on in a monotone, and I knew he was really talking to himself rather than to me: " Always at night—three in a row. They die to low jets, blood-red. Then they spout again, higher and higher, through orange to gold. But the water that falls away from the crest, it seems "—he made a hopeless gesture with his hands as though it was impossible to explain—" it seems thick, heavy, like falling water in a slow-motion film. There is a lot of steam, or smoke—and noise."

His voice was rising now—I could see the sweat pricking his forehead, that fat neck bulging, and for a moment I felt a kind of pity. " I've got to find them "—he was almost shouting—" I must find them. And then I shall be able to sleep again."

I answered softly in the old tongue of the Island, slowly, for it was the first time I had spoken it for many years. " We will find your fountains together," I said. " But first, tell me of this dream."

He spoke haltingly, groping for the words. " It comes to me more often, this dream. Now it is every night. I wake in a sweat, with the taste of burning in my mouth. No sleeping-drug will keep it away. I must know . . ."

I spoke again, quietly, in our own tongue, " How long is it since you had a good kebab with a bottle of resin wine and the right kind of coffee? "

" A long time," he said.

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"In a place like that, we could talk better—of your dream, you and I."

He looked at me doubtfully for a moment, then down at his clothes. "Not like this," he said.

"No—something older. I will meet you outside the back entrance in an hour."

I do not know where he managed to get that shiny blue suit, but when he came out to greet me he looked right. We took a cab to the café and we sat out on the pavement at a little iron table, listening to the blare of the dance hall opposite, watching the passing stream of people on the pavements etched in the harsh blue of the electric light.

I would not let him talk about his fountains until we had eaten. I only remember that the food and wine were good, and that he enjoyed the meal. When the second coffee came and we had lit our cigarettes and the waiter had placed the bottle of Ouzo and the water on the table, I said, "This trouble—does it spring from the past?"

He shook his head without speaking. There was no sound but the clip of a girl's high heels on the pavement and, as she eyed us, her brittle laugh.

"No one can dream the future," I said. "It must be the past. Tell me the past—as you might to a brother or a priest. The truth, right from the beginning. Perhaps new ears may find some little thing that you have missed." And the triumph was that I spoke to an equal—not my master.

He talked for a long time. The Ouzo was singing in my ears as I listened. A little I knew: of the fisherman's son, scraping the odd drachma to buy his own boat, then another, then a third; of the purchase of the first little coaster, so unseaworthy and rotten with rust that he got her almost as a gift; how she foundered, over-insured, so over-insured that he was able to buy two boats out of the proceeds, sailing them under the flag of a state that was not too particular about the legality of Plimsoll lines and annual boiler inspections. Money breeds money, and money is power.

Fifteen years! from wealthy shipowner to multimillionaire—with flats in five capitals, and a private yacht the size of a channel steamer. And then this dream. Some of his story was not pretty: those he had trampled on; those he had cheated. But I knew it was fairly complete—except for one thing.

"There is nothing there," I said when he had finished.

"No." He stubbed out his fifteenth cigarette. "Nothing that is to do with fountains. I wish there were."

"I will find your fountains. When I have, you will come and

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see them. And you will know it is nothing. And you will not dream."

He gripped my arm across the table. "Can you?"

"If they exist anywhere in the world, I know I can."

I started out on this crazy quest the next day, with all his power and his money behind me. He offered me treble pay, but I would not take it. All over the world I went, to all the places where money meets, thinking always in half-formed terms of some gigantic firework display. Twice a week I phoned him, and always a tortured voice crackled back at me over a thousand miles, "Have you found—?"

It was six months before I got the answer, and then only by chance, in a news theatre in Market Street, San Francisco. I had gone in there to relax, and they were showing a not very good colour film of Hawaii. I was half asleep—until there were some shots of a volcano. In the crater, just as he had described, were the three golden fountains, first slobbering blood-red, then jetting to orange, then soaring to pure gold. The molten lava fell away like water in slow-motion, just as he had told me.

I dashed out and put a call straight through. He was at a board-meeting, but he came at once to talk to me, and the amazing part was that he believed me without question though I was not within three thousand miles of the place itself. He just said, "I'll fly out. Book a suite at the Royal Hawaiian, Honolulu. Fix everything."

That wasn't difficult. There was a standard tourist track up to the crater, and though most people went by day, if you paid the guides enough, most of them would take you by night.

He arrived, an eager man, different, almost boyish. He behaved differently to me, treating me like an equal. "I want to see it," he said, gripping my arm. "I want to see it tonight, and then I shall sleep."

We went up the same night, with two guides. They would not go beyond the lip of the crater, but said that it was all right if we did not risk penetrating too far. So he and I went on alone, right down a little rock causeway until we could stand and look into the heart of the seething lava pit.

It was like the Inferno . . . thunder and smoke and the smell of sulphur all around us. I remember so well how incongruous he looked in his white Palm Beach suit. He stood in front of me and I saw him widen those fat shoulders and let out a deep breath.

"This is it, exactly. But it doesn't mean anything."

"No?"

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Something in my tone must have made him turn, just as those searing, blood-red gobs flared up to their golden glory. He looked like a great fat bladder of lard as he stood there on the edge of God's melting-pot, and I saw those eyes go to slits as fear got him—the knowledge, for the first time, that he could not press a bell and get someone to do the rest.

"Your dream was of the last thing you will ever see."

"What do you mean? What do you want?" He had to shout against the roaring of the crater behind him.

"Nothing, except the truth. The fragments of truth that you missed from your story." I had my little knife out of its wrist-sheath now, and the orange light was beautiful on the blade. "Just a few minor details of your first steamer, the one that sank with all hands. Can you tell me the Master's name?"

"Variopolous."

Even above the roar of the crater I heard it; so strange a place to hear my own real name after all those years.

"Yes. My father's name. You do not remember the little boy that cowered in the corner when my mother came to see you with the three children after it happened—to tell you there was no bread. It was dark in your office, so you may not have seen me, but I saw you, and the look in your eyes when you said, 'What is that to me?'"

The flames were dying now and there was no time to let him plead or bribe, so I threw my little knife hard and straight, and it lay stuck in his throat. He stood swaying in his death struggle, as he tried to wrench it out. Tottering, he fell back into the gushing golden fountains.

I leaned over the edge of the rocks until my suit was charred and my hair and eyebrows almost ashes. Then I went back to the guides and told them of the accident, and how he had fallen in. There was nothing they could do—nor the police, except to take a statement. And when the jackals began to tear up his estate, not one of them had time to think of me.

I was content, but often I wonder, how did he come to dream up the perfect meeting-place—the one I had been waiting for over fifteen years?

★ *Remember The Skull and The Sword, Christopher Landon's enthralling tale of Persia?*

His gripping new story of the desert, Ice Cold in Alex, begins in Argosy next month prior to book publication. House-moving to an attractive cottage in Sussex, and work on the film of his new book are keeping this versatile author pretty busy at present.

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GOING BY PARADISE

I'd been led up many a winding garden path by Maggie

BY VERNON SHERIDAN

IN Edinburgh, summer or winter, autumn or spring, few of us respectable folks go by Paradise. Even with the east wind yammering along George Street and rain girning in every gutter —that is, most days between October and May—you'll see us all toiling down the slippery hill right to Great Peter Street, rather than take the short cut through Paradise.

And though for those of us who live in Great Peter Street, its night clamour rises to our back-bedroom windows high above, we prefer not to think of it. That way, according to one of yon schools of philosophy, it ceases to exist.

There are exceptions to this, of course, for we Scots are an exceptional race, and Miss Maggie Dickson was Scots to the bone. But then, with Maggie, it was travel had broadened her mind, already a wee bit loosened by innate eccentricity. Loosened, mind you—not loose. Oh no. As her Uncle James said when at nineteen she set off on a bicycle for the Outer Hebrides wearing a pair of checked bloomers, " Maggie may be eccentric, but she'll never be anything but respectable. Bless me, she's too ungainly, in or out of bloomers, to have the chance."

He was a forthright man, James Dickson.

And time seemed to prove him right. Maggie Dickson at fifty-four had settled to a busy, comfortable spinsterhood in James's house in Great Peter Street. Old James himself had been rolled out to Liberton in great style, many years ago, in the largest hearse Maggie could find, and safely stowed away under a granite plinth the size of the Bass Rock, on which she had had inscribed *De mortuis nil nisi bonum* way up at the top, and the rest blank.

Maggie's always been a great one for Learning.

Before very long, James's place had been taken, very comfortably, too, by Cicero, a kind of gross white cat, whose unsettled ways caused Maggie a deal of trouble and anguish. Almost as much as her unlamented uncle had, but she seemed to enjoy it

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more from a four-footed beast. And it was Cicero, you might say, who brought her to Paradise, though that wasn't just the way she put it herself, as she told us the story over a cup of tea, Miss Judith Maclean, Miss Emma Maclean, and me.

"It was that very dark night—Tuesday, I think—och no, it couldn't have been, I was at the Usher Hall that night, so it must have been Wednesday."

"You were at the concert, then, Maggie?" Miss Judith interrupted.

"Ahuh, I was. Well, as I was saying, it was extra dark, and round about eleven, that wee monster Cicero was not in yet."

Monster, certainly—all sixty-five inches of his snowy circumference. I passed a plate of crumpets—our good Scots kind, you know, none of your anaemic English slabs of rubber, but the large thin roll-up things that drip out at the far end while you nibble away at the other. I always have them for visitors. But Maggie was canny and waved them away.

"So," she continued, leaning forward, "I went out back in the garden with a bicycle lamp. Just in time to see his tail disappear over the wall at the end. Right into Paradise, you know."

"Oh dear, Maggie, that's dreadful," murmured Emma. "Dreadful. Have you been to the police?"

Maggie bridled. "And what for, may I ask? I just nipped out and round myself."

Emma's jaws stopped in the middle of a ladylike chew and a bubble of bramble jelly hung suspended at the other end of her crumpet tunnel. Even Judith interrupted her detailed examination of a sandwich (butter or marg—you know the way spinsters are) to look at Maggie, who now sat back like the last survivor of a Border raid.

"You went—"

"—down Paradise—"

"—*alone?*" Their timing was good enough for the Usher Hall. They ended dead together on the beat.

"I did," said the survivor. "I went up and down several times, flashing my lamp from side to side. Och, the things that go on there, you'd hardly credit it . . ." She lowered her voice.

I'll say this for Maggie Dickson, there's little wrong with either her bicycle lamp or her eyes, even on the darkest night.

"Goodness me," Emma gasped, and the bramble bubble fell, unheeded, on her plate.

"There ought to be a law against it," declared her sister.

"Well," Maggie mused, and I heard her mind stretching with every word, like a piece of old elastic, "it reminded me of some of my adventures in the old days, abroad, you know—"

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" Disgusting," Judith continued. " And so near the Reverend Kirkintilloch's door, too."

" And did you find poor wee Seneca? " I asked, for I did not greatly care for the Reverend Kirkintilloch.

" Cicero," Maggie rebuked me. " Well no, not that night. He came home for breakfast, though, in a terrible state."

Emma finally swallowed her delayed mouthful. " And you? "

Maggie shrugged. " Och, I can take care of myself, you know. Not that it wasn't an unpleasant experience, mind you. Very distasteful. I was quite apprehensive, for a while."

" A—a man? " And you couldn't blame Miss Emma for looking incredulous.

" What exactly did he do? " I asked, for I've been led up many a winding garden path by that same Maggie before now.

" He lurched out at me," she said, her voice rich with buttered dropscone and satisfaction. " From the doorway of the Pibroch and Kippér. I could smell the whisky as he leered down, breathing kind of heavy. You know what I mean? "

" Oh *yes*! " And indeed Miss Emma may have seen it at the pictures.

" What was he like? " Miss Judith seemed suspicious.

" Oh, very tall and powerful. A right brute of a man."

" Five foot eight, perhaps? " Miss Emma liked detail.

" Six foot at the very least." And Maggie enjoyed supplying it.

" Six feet tall," Emma murmured faintly, " and after eleven . . ."

" What happened then? " from Judith who was a great one for action. She was a prominent member of the East of Scotland Ladies' League and had picketed her fishmonger for stocking Yarmouth herring.

" Then he spoke," resumed Maggie. " ' Och, gie us a kiss, hen! ' " She paused reminiscently. " That's what he said."

Judith's anchovy toast lay cooling on her plate. Emma put her cup down. " And you had to, of course? "

" Get away with you, Emma! I did nothing of the sort. The very idea! I just swung my lamp high and hollered ' Cicero! ' He staggered back, fair scunnered. They can always tell when you're a lady. Some of the foreign ones don't mind, of course, but our own chaps . . . He just said, ' Sorry, missus,' and reeled away."

" Oh . . ." and I thought there was a queer note of disappointment in Emma's voice, " poor Maggie . . ."

Well, that was that, and I never thought, believe me, that there'd be any result other than the three tortoiseshell kittens I

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later saw playing with the renamed Cissy in the area of the Dickson house. Maggie was abroad again at the time—by coach, this time—and she had already sent me three picture postcards from outlandish places, none of which I could get my tongue around except one called Split. There, according to her card, the weather was very close.

But, then, that year the summer was hot even in Edinburgh, so there didn't seem much reason for going so far afield for that. Nor for foreigners, come to think of it, as the town was jam full of the queer bodies that this Festival of ours attracts. French, Americans, Italians, Chinese, and English, all wearing tartan and blethering nineteen to the dozen in dear knows what tongue.

It came as no surprise, therefore, when I went for my usual Tuesday tea with old Hector MacHulish who keeps the wee antique shop in Paradise, to find his window crammed with Festival souvenirs of a real imaginative kind. Sporrans worn by the Chevalier, Rabbie Burns, and Errol Flynn formed a hairy backcloth to the collection of Celtic cutlery and lucky cairngorms with a gey glassy look to them.

His daughter Jeanie was minding the shop dressed in a sort of tartan bathrobe and a velvet bonnet with a feather like a palm tree waving. "Well now, Jeanie, what are you this year? The Confidential Clerk, mebbe? or is it the Last of the Mohicans?"

"No, Mistress Mac, it's just Flora Macdonald again. But it's awfu' hot, in this weather. I'm fair sweatin', I can tell you!"

I went through the shop and upstairs, where old MacHulish was waiting for me in the front parlour. Tea was laid, and Hamish, the MacHulish dog, a ginger creature like an old scrubbing-brush, was looking out from the window seat, panting.

The sun beat down on the dusty pavement where murky kids played among discarded paper bags, scraps of orange peel, and cabbage leaves. Suddenly Hamish seemed to stiffen a little. His lolling pink tongue retracted, and his nose went down.

Old Hector went over to see what was interesting him. He served American customers himself; the Europeans were left to Flora. "Dearie me," he said. "Dearie me, now."

I joined him at the window, and dearie me it was indeed. Just halfway down the lane, under the triumphal arches of washing that stretched like last year's bunting across the street, walked Miss Judith Maclean. Intrepid, like, a lady Livingstone. Some distance behind Miss Emma wandered, like the shadow from a guttering candle. A capacious bag was clutched in her hand—och yes, it was Tuesday, when the Ladies' Sewing Circle met.

Emma was still some way from our window when the screech of another being raised startled her and she dropped her bag

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with a squeak. Purse, thimble, spectacle-case, scissors, reels of silk and cotton rattled out on the cobbles and scattered.

Not only these: a voluminous piece of white cambric began to unroll from the emptied bag. Through the still air, I heard her twittering, " Oh dear, poor Mrs. Brodie's . . . oh dear, what ever will Judith say? "

Judith said nothing. Silent and grim she strode underneath our window (I kept well behind old MacHulish's broad shoulder) back towards her sister. Without a word, she bent down, crammed Mrs. Brodie's breeks into the bag, collected the thimble, all the reels she could see, and the spectacle-case, and stuffed them back. Emma stood wringing the purse in her hands; the change jingled and clinked.

" Stop that! Never let on you're carrying money."

" It's only a shilling and a few coppers . . ."

" Shh, will you tempt Providence? "

Emma stopped her fidgeting, clutched the bag again, and tottered on a step or two, looking neither to right nor left while the scissors twinkled in a deep crack between two cobblestones.

The woman who had flung open her window was leaning her elbows on the sill, watching. Judith stared back coldly at the dark complexion and the oily black hair. She muttered some comment to Emma, but there was no reply.

Turning, she saw her standing some distance back. One hand clutched her bag, the other was raised to her cheek, so that all you could see between the brim of her hat and the hand was one frightened eye. In front of her stood a wizened man in dungarees, his hand outstretched.

Judith stamped. " Emma! " she called, and started back again.

Emma turned and, half running, stumbled towards her. The man waved at them and shouted. Something glinted in his hand.

Judith seized her sister's arm and dragged her firmly along. " What did I tell you? How much did you have to give him? "

" I didn't give him anything," wailed Emma. " Oh dear—" past the newspaper shop: *Stabbed Woman Sensation*—" flashing a knife—" over the cobbles—" Maggie . . . so frightened—" through the knot of children—" such an evil face . . . in daylight too—" and under our window, Miss Judith lugged her along.

When they had passed, Hector and I nudged Hamish out of the way and leaned out as Judith, with a last great heave, manœuvred the fluttering Emma round the corner and out of sight.

Paradise Lane dozed in the sunshine. One of the children slipped from the pavement and sat howling in the gutter. The man had stopped shouting, and stood in the middle of the alley looking down at the embroidery scissors glittering absurdly across

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his palm. The woman at the window began to laugh, and the sound careered along the street like a legion of agitated ladies.

Hector and I drew in our heads.

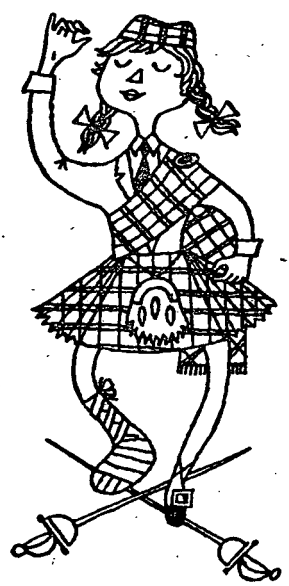
" Dearie me, dearie me," he sighed. " It's wonderful what a little imagination will do for a lady. Like yourself, for instance, with yon tea-caddy of yours that you fancy to be worth three times its real value. Will you take another cup, now? "

I did. And over the third, I let him have the caddy for only twice its value.

The next day, as I passed through on my way to Glebe Street, I saw it standing, unpriced but decorated with a card that said boldly: *Cocoa box: ascribed to Madeleine Smith.* Above it, suspended on a rod along with a bloodstained ruff (*Rizzio*), a bent battle-axe (*Butcher Cumberland*), a tricky skean-dhu (*Johnson's Boswell*), and a small rusty trowel (*Burke & Hare*), hung the bright silver scissors of Miss Emma Maclean.

Peering closer, I made out on its card the neat inscription, a sight more accurate than most of MacHulish's: *Scissors: fancy.*

Inside the shop, Flora Macdonald was trying Errol Flynn's sporran on a chirpy wee Oriental in plus-fours of Buchanan tartan. I'll say this for the MacHulishes: they make the most out of what comes their way.



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★ *Neil Bell is the pen-name of Stephen Southwold. Best known for the novels published under his pseudonym—for instance, Precious Porcelain, Spice of Life—he writes for children under his own name. Born on the Norfolk coast, he loves boats and the sea. This month's reprint is one of his many lively Argosy stories.*

CORRIDOR OF VENUS

BY NEIL BELL

WERE the scene London, this little tale would be considered most improper; but as it was Paris, all is well.

John Brown at twenty-six was considered by most people who knew him, and occasionally by himself, a fortunate young man, for he was extremely good-looking and well built; he held a comfortable post in Mincing Lane with a salary of four hundred a year—quite a fat one in those days for a young man—and he was engaged to one of the prettiest young women who have ever held the honourable post of secretary to the editor of a great daily; and since these young women are invariably ravishing creatures Miss Mary Grey is adequately portrayed.

John and Mary had planned to marry when she was twenty-one, to spend their fortnight's honeymoon in Paris, and to live in Golders Green. As Mary's birthday drew near, the furnishing (a gift from John's parents) of the little house (a gift from Mary's) was completed; the banns put up at St. Botolph's; and no fewer than four guide-books to Paris purchased as well as return tickets to that city of enchantment (second class on the train, first in the packet boat).

The great day arrived. For March the weather was summery, almost perfect; and, happiest of auguries, the sun shone brightly as they emerged from St. Botolph's, man and wife. The reception was the jolliest of affairs; the speeches affable, gay, but decorous, as became an English wedding. They caught the noon train from Victoria, reached Paris at seven, and drove straight to the very comfortable and homely hotel in the avenue Kléber, recommended by an elderly friend of the bride's father.

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L'Hôtel Belmont prided itself on being old-fashioned. It abhorred the new-fangled; was still lit by gas although it had adopted as a concession to the times the incandescent mantle; and in the matter of plumbing and sanitation was content to be unenterprising. But Mr. and Mrs. John Brown would have overlooked far greater drawbacks. They were very much in love. The world was a wonderful place; l'Hôtel Belmont an Aladdin's palace of delight. They had a marvellous dinner and John was very knowledgeable and authoritative over the wines. After dinner they had café cognac and Mary was almost persuaded to try a cigarette. And then they decided to go to bed and were suddenly a little shy of one another.

On their way up to Room No. 7 in the Round Corridor, John made great fun of the key which was large and rather rusty and might have come from a dungeon door. He pretended that he was her gaoler, locking her up for the night; and this made them laugh so much that they were breathless when they reached the landing (l'Hôtel Belmont scorned lifts) and paused and looked quickly round and then into each other's eyes and kissed before they tiptoed on again. They did not know they were tiptoeing.

Jean Lebrun was, at twenty-eight, the youngest attorney in the ancient city of Rouen and was considered by all the young women of the city a most desirable match. He thought so, too, and proposed to bestow himself only where there were good looks combined with a fat *dot*. It must be admitted that he was handsome and well made and therefore thoroughly justified in demanding in a bride the highest physical and material qualities. He found them in the seductive person of Marie-Thérèse Legris; and both families being highly delighted and the matter of the *dot* amicably settled, the young couple were married, first at the Mairie and afterwards at l'Eglise du Sacré-Cœur.

Jean and Marie-Thérèse had decided on Paris for their honeymoon and but for a coincidence of the past would have gone to one of the big fashionable hotels, such as the Crillon or the Lotti. The coincidence (of the most charming) was that the parents of both had spent their honeymoon some thirty years earlier (although not at the same time) at the comfortable and homely old Hôtel Belmont and so, to please their parents, Jean and Marie-Thérèse allowed themselves to be persuaded to go there.

They arrived shortly after seven o'clock, dined and wined with exquisite discrimination, and about ten o'clock went up to bed. Their room was No. 9 in the Round Corridor and they found the enormous key a great joke. Marie-Thérèse pointed out how like it was to the great key hanging at the girdle of the statue of

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St. Peter in l'Eglise du Sacré-Cœur, and Jean said of course it was, as it was the key to heaven.

Just after two o'clock, John woke from a deep sleep. He was thirsty; intolerably thirsty. He lay for a while listening to the slow soft breathing of Mary beside him and touched her caressingly. But his thirst refused to be thrust from the forefront of his consciousness by no matter what delightful images. Thoughts of long cool drinks tormented his mind and at last, as there was no water in the bedroom, he came to the unattractive conclusion that there was nothing else for it but to make a journey to the only bathroom in the Round Corridor and there assuage this burning thirst.

Since there was but one bathroom in the corridor, which was precisely what its name declared, round; and as Room No. 7 was almost exactly opposite in the periphery to the bathroom, John was faced with a chilly trip of some seventy or eighty yards. But it had to be done, for the thirst was now unendurable. Softly and carefully he left the bed, tiptoed to the door, opened it, and then realized that so dark was the corridor that he could not distinguish the number. And so, to prevent a mistake, he left the door slightly ajar and, turning to the right, set off for the bathroom.

In Room No. 9 Jean had been woken by a similar raging thirst and he lay for some time cursing his forgetfulness in not bringing up a bottle of Vichy. He also cursed the hotel for an old-fashioned barracks and swore they'd clear out next day. But meanwhile this frightful thirst had to be assuaged, and with a stifled groan he got out of bed, shuffled to the door, and came out into the corridor. Finding the number of the room indistinguishable in the darkness, he left the door ajar and, turning to the left, set off for the bathroom.

John, his thirst satisfied, came out of the bathroom and forgetfully turned left instead of right. He met Jean coming towards the bathroom, but in true English fashion passed him in silence. He proceeded slowly and quietly, keeping his eye open for a door ajar; and presently finding it, went in, closed the door softly, and crept into bed, which felt deliciously warm. He snuggled close to the gently breathing figure beside him. There was a sleepy murmuring and soft arms went round him. He returned the embrace with ardour.

Jean, emerging from the bathroom, made a similar mistake in direction and, coming to Room 7, entered, crept into bed, and was ardently if sleepily welcomed by its occupant.

About five o'clock Mary woke and lay for some time happily reviewing the adventures and experiences of the past twenty-four

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hours. She wondered what the time was and then, remembering the little chain hanging from the gas light over the bed, reached up and pulled it down gently, and a dull yellow light filled the room.

She glanced lovingly down at the sleeping figure beside her and only with the utmost difficulty repressed a scream.

Bewildered and horrified, she got out of bed and tiptoed to the door, her mind such a wash of confused thoughts that she scarcely knew what she was doing.

As she emerged into the corridor the door of the next room opened and a rather dishevelled young woman came out. They looked at each other.

"There's a—a strange man in my—my bed!" gasped Mary.

"There's one in mine!" replied much more calmly Marie-Thérèse, who very fortunately spoke English. "Is he dark and tall and handsome, this young man in your bed?"

Mary blushed faintly. "I—I hardly know," she said. "I—I think so."

"May I come in?"

"Oh, please do."

Marie-Thérèse, followed by Mary, entered Room No. 7. She gave one swift glance at the sleeping young man. "It is my husband," she whispered.

"Then where is *my* husband?" Mary said, also in a whisper, and almost in tears.

Holding up a finger for silence, Marie-Thérèse beckoned her from the room and together they tiptoed into Room No. 9.

Even before she looked Mary knew. Her eyes went to the face of the sleeping John. She nodded her head and said softly, "It is my husband. Oh, what shall we do? And how could it have happened?"

Again motioning her to silence, Marie-Thérèse led the way into the corridor and there the two young women looked into each other's eyes. "Oh, what are we going to do?" Mary said. And then she said again, "But how *could* it have happened?"

"That is not difficult," Marie-Thérèse said; "in half a dozen ways. But what we are going to do is not so simple. If my husband discovers what has happened he will blame everyone but himself and will probably challenge your husband to a duel and he is the best shot in Rouen and will undoubtedly kill him."

"And if my husband finds out," Mary said, "his rage will be dreadful. He is a great boxer and will undoubtedly knock out your husband and perhaps break his nose. We *must* do something before they wake."

"I have it," Marie-Thérèse said, "it is so simple. We will

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just change all our things round; all yours and your husband's into No. 9 and ours into No. 7. We must be quiet and quick, for the staff will be about in another hour."

But long before the hour was out the change had been made, and when John woke in Room No. 9 he found Mary sleeping beside him and looking so pretty and desirable that he woke her with a kiss, a long kiss.

And while they kissed, Jean in Room No. 7 was sitting up in bed rubbing his eyes and then pushing his fingers through his thick black hair. His glance fell upon his sleeping bride and he began to caress her.

While he was dressing John looked out of the window and said to Mary, lovingly watching him from the pillow, "Do you know, darling, I could have sworn I saw the Eiffel Tower from this window when we first arrived."

"I expect you caught a glimpse of it coming up the stairs and forgot," Mary smiled.

"I suppose so. And I forgot the number too, for I'm hanged if I didn't think it was No. 7."

"Why, darling, what a head you have! Don't you remember saying that nine was your lucky number?"

"Blowed if I do." He looked at her over his shoulder. "But it certainly is; and you're lovely enough to make a man forget anything. In three seconds I'm coming over to kiss you."

And in the next room Jean was scratching his head and looking out of the window with a faintly puzzled frown.

"Why, my sweet little cabbage," he said, "you can see the old Eiffel from this window. Funny I didn't notice it when we came up last night."

"But the curtains were drawn, you old silly," Marie-Thérèse laughed.

"Were they? And I could have sworn I saw the stars shining through the window. It must have been your pretty eyes. You certainly bewitched me, for I'd somehow or other the idea in my stupid head that our room was No. 9."

"Why, Jean!" Marie-Thérèse laughed. "Have you already forgotten the pretty speech you made about our room number? You said seven was just right for it stood for the seventh heaven."

Jean grinned fatuously and glanced over at her. "You're enough to make anyone forget his own name, ma mie. Will you scream if I come over and bite you?"

Nine months later Mary presented John with a fine boy. He was proud and delighted. So were the four grandparents. They declared the babe a darling and the image of his father.

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Mary, smiling happily into the wide unblushing eyes of her first-born, agreed that he certainly was a darling; but for the rest, she could not help wondering.

And over in Rouen, Marie-Thérèse was intently scanning the face of twenty-four-hour-old Jean-Pierre and wondering too.

★ ★ ★

TUPPENCE COLOURED

Brighten up your wits by a spin through our prism. If your mind remains blank, hue and cry to page 90 where the 12 answers are given.

1. *Ridiculous excess, says Shakespeare, to add another hue unto the rainbow; we shall be quite satisfied if you are able to name the colours of the spectrum in their correct order.*
2. *Green for danger! Here are three novelists and three book titles: can you match them up? Graham Greene, F. L. Green, Henry Green—" Odd Man Out," " Loving," " Brighton Rock."*
3. *Famille jaune, sang de bœuf, blanc de chine—terms that would immediately make sense to one of these specialists: an ornithologist, a couturier, or a collector of porcelain.*
4. *Caution, signals ahead! Can you describe the sequence in which the amber, red, and green of the traffic-lights appear?*
5. *Over to the States, and if you travelled through the Blue Grass State, the Golden State, and the Green Mountain State, what territory would you have covered?*
6. *Franciscans, Dominicans, Carmelites—they are known as White, Grey, and Black Friars, but not exactly in that order. Can you rearrange them?*

★ ★ ★

A DRINKING BOUT

How long have I been lying asleep,
Here on the fragrant grass?
The sun is already setting
Behind me in the west.
There lie my jug and wine-cup
Overturned upon the ground,
And my guest!
He must have departed long ago!
I cannot remember picking flowers,
Yet my hands are both quite full!
How did they ever come?

LIU CHIA

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CRICKET

A lob meant nothing to Lobelia

BY JOAN AIKEN

THERE had been a persistent knocking from within the septic tank for several days, and by degrees it could not but become plain that someone must be trapped inside it.

The Beauclercs were too cautious—nay, parsimonious—to use anything for its rightful purpose; consequently the tank was employed as a storehouse for kilner jars, sugar-soap, trunks, manuscripts of Christmas carols, and other things used only once a year. A distant portion of the orchard, known as the Belvedere, was allotted for the usual purpose of the w.c., which housed live bait.

Mrs. Beauclerc was sowing late peas in the hot afternoon sun when the Reverend Henry Dottel came weaving on his bicycle across the lawn.

"So like the powdered tomato soup, isn't it?" she said, straightening up and scratching her back with the dibber in a manner as dignified and archaic as the part of a priest in a formal ritual.

Mr. Dottel peered anxiously at the mixture of red lead and paraffin which she had in her saucepan. It did resemble tomato soup with a few dried peas rolling about in it, and he felt that Mrs. Beauclerc would be quite capable of serving it up at table.

"When you bury my husband you had better be sure to ask for an autopsy first."

The deep voice over his head made him jump. Mrs. Beauclerc had read his thought with disconcerting accuracy, and it was unfair that she should be so much taller than he; towering over his head, she was like some primitive African goddess.

"You want to speak to Fred, no doubt," she said, and indeed, the Admiral was swinging himself across the garden in his chair, which was something between a flying fox and an overhead cash conveyor, slung from tree to tree.

"Do you want to discuss the match against Sleeve?" he asked eagerly, as the chair came to rest under the Florence Court Yew. "You had better put Beeswick in to bat first. I've been thinking about it all night."

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"No, I hadn't come about that." The Admiral's face fell. "My errand was of a more serious nature. I wanted to remind you once more that it is time little Daffodil was christened."

He had evidently screwed up all his courage to speak, but met with a blank reception; the Admiral was bored and disappointed, while his wife assumed a withdrawn, dispassionate expression, and dropped a few more peas into her drill. "That's really Jasper's affair," she remarked. "After all, he's her father."

"My son will see to it," the Admiral agreed. "Here he is."

The Estimable Jasper Beauclerc was as tall as his mother, but looked wild where she was patrician. He came prowling towards them, glancing to right and left as if only invisible palisades kept him from escaping.

"Mr. Dottel wishes to christen little Daffodil," his mother observed. She glanced in the direction of the converted pig-trough where her grandchild lay kicking and cooing.

"No!" Jasper almost shouted.

"But, my dear boy! Supposing she were to contract polio or measles—unlikely eventualities, thank Providence, but such misfortunes *do* occur—how would you feel if she were to die without having been christened?"

"At least she'd be in the same place as her mother, wherever *that* is," snapped Jasper furiously and miserably.

"My son still feels his wife's loss very deeply," the Admiral apologized, as Mrs. Beauclerc led Jasper aside and appeared to soothe and restrain him. "In a way it's a mistake, you know, marrying these Melanesian women. Marvellous cooks, of course, I've never for one moment regretted marrying Lobelia, but some of them are too delicate for the English climate. And what's even worse, they none of them take any interest in sport. I can't even get Lobelia to follow the Test Match, and Jasper takes after her, though I've done my best with the boy. There's precious little hope for Daffodil, having the strain from both parents."

Jasper and his mother had finished their colloquy and returned to the other two.

"Let's stroll down to the millrace, Mr. Dottel," said Mrs. Beauclerc. "It's cooler there, we can discuss the matter more comfortably." Jasper let out an inarticulate protest, but she hushed him with a gesture of calm authority.

The Admiral eyed them with suspicion as they crossed the sunbaked lawn. "You must understand," Mrs. Beauclerc went on, "that my daughter-in-law's last wish was that the baby should *not* be christened. She belonged, as I do, to the Kiya religion, which, of course, is a form of sun-worship."

"Rank heathenism," said Mr. Dottel, shuddering. "Some

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of them are cannibals, too, aren't they? Of course, I don't mean to cast any aspersions at *you*, dear lady, though indeed, living in the Manor House as you do, it would be greatly appreciated if you were to attend the morning service from time to time."

Mrs. Beauclerc gazed at him abstractedly. She might have been measuring him for a shroud. "*Now*, I think," she said to Jasper, as they crossed the narrow catwalk above the millrace, and, seizing Mr. Dottel by his shoulders, she tipped him in.

He went round in the swirl two or three times while Jasper, with a long pole, adroitly kept him from climbing out. After the fourth revolution he sank, and did not reappear. "We still have a barrel of vinegar," observed Mrs. Beauclerc with satisfaction. "If you pour it in he should keep nicely till Sunday."

At this moment a clanging and tingling of wires announced the furious advent of the Admiral, bearing down on them in his chair like an avenging angel.

"You've done it!" he said. "I thought you were up to something of the kind. Play these tricks on strangers, if you must, but now what the devil are we to do for a wicketkeeper?"

"Oh really, Fred, he was getting to be a terrible nuisance," remonstrated Mrs. Beauclerc. "You'll find somebody else to keep your wicket easily enough."

"I'd like to know who, in this blasted countryside."

"How about the person in the septic tank?"

"That's an extremely good idea," said the Admiral, brightening. "Of course, it may be a woman," he added, relapsing into gloom. "Still, it's worth trying."

He swung his chair round and propelled himself feverishly in the direction of the manhole-cover. The baby's improvised cot was on it, and it took a moment to move her aside, during which the banging from beneath grew more excited and obstreperous.

The Admiral raised the thick metal cover and peered through the crack. "Do you play cricket?" he bawled.

A faint reply came back. The Admiral let slip the lid, which fell into place with a clang.

"Hockey!" he said, with an expression of disgust, and climbed heavily into his chair.

★ ★ ★

TRUNK CALL

Old Bancroft was terribly correct in the observance of social obligations, including attendance at funerals. When W. S. Gilbert heard that the big elephant at the Zoo had died, he immediately asked, "Has Bancroft sent a wreath?"

PHILIP CARR, on *Supper at the Garrick in the 'Nineties*

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Great is advertisement
Lord Tennyson

CRINOLINES — THE PATENT ONDINA, or Waved Jupon, does away with the unsightly results of the ordinary hoops, and so perfect are the wave-like bands that a lady may ascend a steep stair, lean against a table, throw herself into an arm chair, pass to her stall at the opera, or occupy a fourth seat in a carriage, without inconvenience to herself or others, or provoking the rude remarks of the observers, besides removing or modifying in an important degree all those peculiarities tending to destroy the modesty of Englishwomen; and lastly, allows the dress to fall into graceful folds.

The Times, April 21st, 1864

Vivace Con Spirito

To Ladies and Gentlemen, and Families in the Country, who wish for a Dance in the Winter Evenings, without being at the Expence of hiring a Band.—To be sold, a capital toned ORGAN, with Three Barrels, Six Stops, a Drum, and Triangle; plays thirty of the most fashionable Tunes, stands between five and six feet high, and has been made about two months; cost 40 guineas, price now 30 guineas.

The Observer, November 27th, 1808

Catering Trade Union

Bachelor, age 31, height 6 ft., good appearance, Assistant Hotel Manager, small capital, fond of music, theatre, etc., wishes to meet young lady, age 25 to 35, of similar status. Essentials: Capital, good knowledge catering, etc., fond of music, must be sincere and keen to found happy home. Object: Matrimony, and the acquisition of a Licensed Hotel or similar.

From a matrimonial paper

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Sharp Practice

Hair-cutter and clean shaver.
Gentlemen's throats cut with very sharp razors, with great care and skill.
No irritating feelings afterwards. A trial solicited.

Indian barber's notice

Pearly Gates

OSTEO-EIDON — What is it? . . . GABRIEL's self-adhesive patent indestructible MINERAL TEETH and FLEXIBLE GUMS, without palates, springs, or wires, and without operation. One set lasts a lifetime, and warranted for mastication or articulation.

Illustrated London News,
June 21st, 1862

Excursion

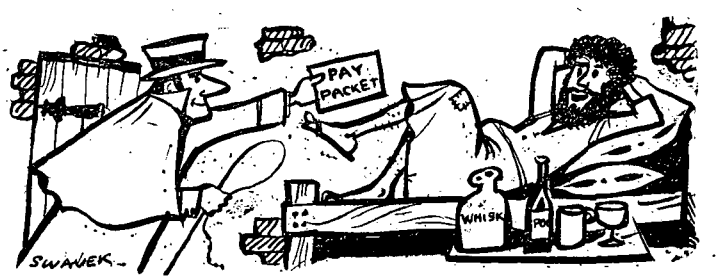
A Reward for Sabbath Breaking
People taken Safely and Swiftly to Hell
Next Lord's Day by the Carlisle Railway for 7s. 6d.
It is a Pleasure Trip ! !

Poster protesting against the first Sunday railway excursion, August 29th, 1840

Cave Man

A young man, who wishes to retire from the world and live as a hermit, in some convenient spot in England, is willing to engage with any nobleman or gentleman who may be desirous of having one. Any letter directed to S. Laurence (post paid), to be left at Mr. Otton's, No. 6 Coleman Lane, Plymouth, mentioning what gratuity will be given, and all other particulars.

The Courier,
January 11th, 1810



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The Queen of Spain Fritillary

H.E. BATES

Enchanting new novel of love and high summer

I WAS a dark-haired, pretty, and rather tiresome girl of seventeen when my mother and elder sister took me on my first visit to a house called Orleans, a short distance above a wide bend of the river and overlooking some miles of meadows, in the valley of the Ouse.

It was one of those rare afternoons in July when the air was drenched in the scent of roses and the fragrance of hay lying thick-cut in field after field along the river as we drove up in the big landaulet taxi we had hired to bring us from the village station. It was very hot too that day, in spite of a strong breeze, and with a remarkable shimmering light on all the distances.

This light had one extraordinary effect I shall never forget. As we drove along the road to the house we were, at one point, high above the valley on an open ridge. Below us we could see perhaps a mile of river winding in big curves, under humpbacked bridges of stone, among the rich flat fields of hay.

Suddenly I saw, repeated again and again, all along the stream, what I thought at first were flocks of pure white ducks. They seemed to be floating quite motionless, between dark green banks of reed. Then, as the taxi dropped farther and farther down the

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Curiosity like a magnet drew her on

valley, I saw that I was mistaken. What I had thought were ducks were really whole islands, purest white, of water-lilies, in the crown of their bloom.

"I hope you're not going to sulk again, child," my mother said.

I had not been quite myself that summer; I was probably outgrowing my strength, my mother said. It was true that I was often sulking and I must confess I felt most like sulking when my mother called me child. It is perhaps a good thing to make it plain, also, that I did not get on at all well with my sister.

Angela was a very determined person of twenty-five, fair-haired, healthy, and ambitious, who was going to be married in October. Our visit to this house, with its attractive and un-English name of Orleans, was part of a long search for somewhere where she and Ewart Mackeson, her fiancé, a successful junior partner in a leather-tanning company, could live.

It was still fairly easy to get servants in those days, and what Mr. Mackeson and my sister were looking for was a house of twelve or fifteen rooms, with stables if possible, an orchard or paddock, perhaps a few acres of shooting, a lawn on which to play tennis, and an entrance marked *Tradesmen* at the side.

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Neither Angela nor Mr. Ewart Mackeson understood architecture, beauty, or anything of that sort. What they were looking for was quite simple. It was, as I once told them with what I thought was a flash of enlightened sarcasm, suburbia in tweeds. Ewart Mackeson was in fact a type that has become more and more common with the passing years. He wanted to be an officer in a good suburban regiment, playing the country squire.

You might have thought that that sort of house would not have been difficult to find. The country is, after all, full of them. It is the sort of house that used so often to be called The Grange or The Cedars: it had virginia creeper covering its red brickwork, and gardens where clipped hedges of box enclosed beds of yellow calceolaria, blue lobelia, and scarlet geraniums. It was a type of house—residence is really the right word—built exclusively by and for people like Mr. Ewart Mackeson and my sister.

There is no doubt that houses have souls, but I suppose they reveal themselves only to certain temperaments to which they are suited. Certainly, that summer, no house revealed its soul to us. We must have looked at twenty or thirty altogether and all of them were hopeless. If their views were entrancing their sanitation was primeval; if they possessed stables they were also next to the gas-works; if their gardens were delightful there were odours suspicious of mice in the bedrooms.

Everyone knows, I suppose, about these impossible characteristics of houses for sale, and all I really want to make clear is that by that hot afternoon in mid July I had reached the point when I never wished to see another house. I had, in fact, made up my mind not to go to see Orleans. I had worked up inside myself such an antipathy towards that house that I spent most of the morning lying at the bottom of the garden, staring into space, sulking.

It is only fair to say that I was very often sulking. One of my most frequent and formidable sulks was about Mr. Ewart Mackeson. From the first Mr. Mackeson put my back up. It is not possible to explain it easily, but whenever he came into the room I felt myself begin to bristle. In fact there was even more to it than that. One of the first manifestations of my not being well that summer was a tendency to go off to my room and lie down, refusing to eat, when Mr. Mackeson came to supper. My blood curdled at the thought of him and his invasion of our three-part feminine privacy. There was, for example, the instance of the coloured leather. One of Mr. Mackeson's business experiments was that of tanning leather in new bright shades. They were really exquisite, some of those chrome-yellows, scarlets, royal blues, emeralds, lime-greens, and even pinks and pigeon-greys.

The tanning of leather is not, I suppose, a very romantic occupation except to the chemists who conjure up the dyes, and it was beyond me to grasp at seventeen that Mr. Ewart Mackeson was himself a talented person, something of an artist in his way.

One evening that spring, anyway, he brought along to the house several samples of these bright new leathers to show my sister.

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He wanted her to choose a colour—if she liked, several colours—so that he could have made for her a pair of shoes and a handbag to match them.

Finally Angela chose a pale green leather, almost the shade of an unripe bean. I did not say anything. A colour can be exquisite in itself and yet be atrocious, pure murder, for a certain type of person. I knew that that pale bean shade would kill my sister's pale hair and features, but I made no comment.

And then Mr. Mackeson said, "And what about you, Mrs. Burnett? Wouldn't you like to choose something too?"

My mother was a tall pink woman who was sometimes inclined to gush. Alternatively she would simper. She, too, like my sister, was fair and pale. Although her body was angular and thin, she always wore long boned corsets and in the summer carried a dark grey parasol to keep the sun from her face, with its unblemished complexion of China-rose. The result was that sometimes she had the appearance of being embalmed.

"Oh no! I couldn't, Ewart, I couldn't. I really couldn't," she said. That was, of course, just a pose of hers; it was simply a case of protesting too much. The gush was far too obvious. And presently my mother, after more pressure from Mr. Mackeson and more refusal and more protest from her, was choosing her own piece of leather.

"That red, I think. No, the yellow. Shall I? I love the red—I do absolutely love the red. Like a tomato, isn't it? What shall it be, Angela? What do you say?"

Finally, of all things, she chose a yellow. It was a mustard yellow, unfriendly, chemical, and hard. It was a hopeless colour for anyone except a dark person like myself, or even a coloured person, to wear.

But I still made no comment. My mother, I remember, made a few more gushing remarks about how heavenly and charming that shade of yellow was, and how generous and too nice Mr. Ewart Mackeson was, and then he suddenly turned to me and said, "Now, Laura, what about you? Come on now—what do you fancy?"

I suppose he was simply trying to be ordinarily civil and nice to me; I suppose he could hardly have done less than that. But suddenly I got up, looked witheringly at him, and said with sarcasm, "No, thank you. I don't want to look like a mustard plaster. Or something in a pea-green boat, for that matter," and then turned sharply on my heel and went upstairs.

The truth is that I was very fond of my sister. She was already a young woman, wearing woman's clothes, when I was eleven or twelve. I looked up to her with that distant heroine-worship that only the very young can give, and there was of course nothing at all to affect it or disturb it until Mr. Ewart Mackeson appeared. It was very hard for me to accustom myself to the idea, though I did not consciously grasp it at the time, that my sister was going to be taken away from me.

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From all this it is easy to see why, as I sat in the back of the landaulet taxi that afternoon, staring at the river, the meadows of hay, and the water-lilies that looked like crowds of pure white ducks in the simmering light of July, my mother should say, " I hope you're not going to sulk again, child, I hoped we'd got over that."

I was in fact not sulking. I was really absorbed in that illusive trick of light that the afternoon had played on me. I was really entranced by the fact that a crowd of ducks had turned themselves into water-lilies and I wanted to be left alone with the idea, entranced, for a little longer.

That was why I said, as the taxi drew up at the iron gates of the house, under a long row of tall, flowering limes, " I'm not coming in. I'll sit here and wait for you."

" I shall not argue," my mother said. She got out of the car and snapped up her dark grey parasol. " I shall not argue. There's no point in wasting breath. As long as you behave like a child you must be treated as a child."

I wanted to point out, tersely, that I was not a child. In short I said, " I might even start to walk back. You can pick me up on the way."

" Do entirely as you wish," my mother said. " Have it entirely your own way."

A minute later she disappeared, with my sister, up the gravel drive, between thick shrubberies of lilac and laurustinus, towards the stone, white-windowed house that could be seen, with its high white doorway and its big black iron boot-scraper, at the end.

Presently I heard the doorbell ring. After a few moments I saw an elderly maid in white cap and apron answer the door. Then my mother and sister disappeared into the house and after that I suppose I sat there for four or five minutes before I became aware of an extraordinary thing.

I suddenly experienced an overwhelming curiosity about the house. I felt I had to see it after all. It was not simply that it was in itself very different from all those virginia-creepered, half-towered desirable residences we had seen all summer. It was not only because it had no virginia creeper to smother the walls. It was true that it had a big pale yellow rose, with almost plum-coloured foliage, growing above the door, and over one gable one of those huge magnolias, with thick polished leaves, whose flowers are so like large pure cream chalices.

All these things were attractive in themselves but they had nothing to do with what I had started to feel. What I felt had nothing particularly to do with beauty, with the charm of the yellow rose above the doorway, the flowerless magnolia cool in the heat, or the drenching fragrance of the long row of limes. It had nothing to do, either, with that curious sensation people so often experience with places, and with houses especially: the sensation, not always pleasant and sometimes uncannily disturbing, that they have been there before.

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What I felt was a rather startling sense of communication with that house. Of course, the sensory impressions and perception of the very young are often over-acute, and perhaps the definition of what I felt may sound absurd. But this is the way youth feels and it did not seem at all absurd to me that afternoon that the house had, as it were, something to say to me.

That is perhaps a naïve and clumsy way of putting it, and the only other way I can express it is to say that it was rather like your being in a room and hearing urgent whispers of conversation going on in another. In a situation like that you are more than eaten up with overwhelming curiosity. You realize that if you don't listen at that moment, quickly, it will be too late. You will never know what the urgent whispers of conversation are about. It will all be lost and you will regret it for ever.

That was why, a few moments later, I was walking up the drive.

I rang the doorbell twice, but nothing happened. I discovered afterwards that there was only one servant indoors and that she at that moment was showing my mother and my sister through the rooms upstairs.

After another two or three minutes I decided not to ring again and I started to walk back down the drive. And then, for the second time, I experienced that extraordinary feeling of curiosity. And almost at once, not stopping to think, I turned and began to walk round to the side of the house, through a large archway of yew, into the gardens beyond.

The gardens sloped away sharply, in a series of terraces joined by stone steps, to the river. I was surprised to see them, in contrast to the front of the house, running wild. Tall coarse yellow mulleins, with caterpillar-eaten leaves, had sown themselves all through the flower-beds, among the roses and even, at one place, in broken cucumber frames. Sunflowers were presently going to obliterate the beds of asparagus. Soon there would be nothing to be seen of a plantation of raspberries, struggling with an invasion of white convolvulus in full trumpet bloom.

I walked slowly through this choking mass of vegetation to the river. A path ran along the bank, heavily shaded by big balsam poplar trees. You could smell the fragrance of balsam leaves in the hot flat air, and in the shadow of the trees the river was dark, with deep under-skeins of weed.

Halfway along the path was a little wooden landing-stage with a seat on it. It was surrounded by a handrail, and a punt was chained to the end. The punt, the little seat, the landing-stage—in fact everything about it was, unlike the garden, surprisingly well kept. The punt had recently been painted a fresh bright green and even the name of the house, Orleans, had been picked out in white at the stern end.

I followed the path for forty or fifty yards along the river and began presently to approach the boundaries of the garden on the other side. It was wilder than ever there, with a few straggling

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pyramid pear trees growing in long meadow grass as tall as wheat and in full seed.

Beyond all this was another hedge of yew, ten or twelve feet high, with a path cut through the grass beside it. I started to walk up this path. Then, halfway up the slope, I heard a voice. It was a man's voice and it seemed, I thought, to be talking to itself in the hot still air. And it was talking very remarkably.

I am not sure, at this distance of time, if I can remember word for word exactly what it was saying but presently what I heard was, I think, something like this: "It forms a ladder of its web so that it can climb up it to any height—even up a pane of glass. They smell awfully disagreeably but apparently the Romans thought them delicious. They were a favourite dish of theirs."

That was about all I heard before I came upon the man himself, standing by the hedge. He was a man of sixty or so, a little under medium height, rather spruce, with very smooth grey hair. He was wearing a cream shantung summer jacket, grey trousers with a chalk stripe in them, and a white panama.

There was nothing in the least remarkable about all this. What was remarkable was that he was holding a branch of about half a dozen leaves in his hand. At first I thought he was talking to these leaves. Then I saw that I was mistaken. Something was crawling up the branch and I concluded, mistakenly as it turned out, that he was talking to that.

It was a thick, naked, pink caterpillar. It was quite repulsive.

If it is surprising for a girl of seventeen to come upon an elderly gentleman in a strange garden talking to an ugly caterpillar, it must be equally surprising for elderly gentlemen to have conferences of this kind interrupted by strange girls of seventeen.

The surprising thing was that he did not show surprise at all. He looked at me, then looked at the caterpillar, which had now reached the tip of the branch, and seemed for a moment undecided which of us to attend to first. Then, very deftly, he turned the branch the other way up, so that the caterpillar could climb up it again, and with the other hand raised his panama.

As he took off his hat I saw that his eyes, remarkably blue in the brilliant sunshine, transfixed me. "Good afternoon," he said.

I began to explain how it was I was there, how sorry I was to interrupt him, and so on, and he said, "Yes. Oh yes! Yes, of course," several times, watching me with the remarkably blue bright eyes while I in turn stood watching the caterpillar.

"Will this lead me back to the house?" I said.

"One moment. One moment," he said and then started to address the hedge. "It seems I have visitors. About the house. You understand, dear, don't you? I'll show you a figure of the goat later. It's rather a treasure. This one's a bit of a freak, of course. He ought not to be out now. He ought to have been out in May, but that's how it is sometimes."

Of course, youth is very quick to spot the ridiculous. And suddenly I thought I'd never seen anything quite as killing as

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this business of holding this repulsive caterpillar on a stick and conducting a two-part conversation with it and a hedge. It seemed funnier still when, through a break in the hedge, I saw the flap of a big pink sun-hat on the other side and heard a woman's voice say, "Of course, dear. That I shall look forward to immensely. Au revoir, Frederick. Good-bye."

"Au revoir," he said.

Already by this time the caterpillar had climbed to the top of the branch and now the man in the panama, turning to me, deftly twisted the branch upside-down so that the caterpillar could climb up it again.

"Do come this way," he said.

To my surprise he began to lead me back down the path, towards the river. All the time, he held the branch at half-arm's length, rather like a torch, and I didn't think I'd ever seen anything quite so fatuous.

He seemed, to make the whole thing more ridiculous, absolutely absorbed in me. He talked very quickly, in rather a fluty sort of voice, asking all sorts of questions. Then, unable to take his eyes off me, he eventually completely forgot the caterpillar, which finally reached the top of the stick and sat there looking most disagreeably naked and slightly bloated.

"So you've come to see this house?" he said. "Well, well. How nice. Indeed. How nice. These are the only two houses that front on the river here. All the rest of the land, you see, is meadow. With a continual danger of floods, you see, so that you can't build down there. It's only just here, because of this bend and the big bank, that it's been possible to have these houses."

It was, I still thought, extraordinarily funny: the prattling fluty voice, the enthusiasm, the eagerness, like that of a boy, and always, of course, the caterpillar.

And presently the caterpillar itself got funnier still. At the path by the river we stopped for nearly five minutes while he went into a prolonged explanation about the punt and the landing-stage. By this time I was not listening very closely and he, more and more absorbed in me, was not looking at the caterpillar.

I saw that it had, in fact, crawled back down the stick and now, slowly and steadily, hunching its back, was crawling up his arm.

"And what is your name? I mean," he said, "your Christian name."

"Laura," I said.

"How charming," he said. The little bright blue eyes glittered, dancing with pleasure as the caterpillar crawled up the neat shantung arm. "And what are you—I mean, how old? Seventeen?"

"Nineteen," I said.

The whole affair was so ridiculous that the lie about my age was, I thought, not only in keeping with it all but made it, if possible, more fun.

"Still at school?"

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"Oh heavens, no!" I said. And this time I didn't lie. "I haven't been to school all the summer."

"No?" he said. "Well, you don't look like a schoolgirl. You look too sure of yourself for that."

I suppose that flattered me: to be told that I looked as old as I had pretended to be. But even the flattery didn't quite cancel out the comic tone of the whole situation. The caterpillar was now, I saw, crawling on his shoulder. I watched it, fascinated, ready to shriek if it reached his neck.

He, on the other hand, didn't seem to notice it at all, and presently he said, tapping the little seat on the landing-stage, "Come and sit down for a minute and tell me all about yourself."

"I ought to go," I said. I began to explain how my mother and my sister would be waiting for me. I said something about their thinking, perhaps, that I might be walking back along the road, and he said, "Who has really come to look at the house? Your mother?"

"Oh no, my sister. You see, she's to be married soon."

The caterpillar had reached the lapel of his shantung jacket, just above the buttonhole. It was arching its ugly head this way and that, feeling the air.

"Is your sister like you?" he said.

"She's fair," I said. "Like my mother. I am like my father's side."

The caterpillar decided to start its upward journey towards his neck.

Then I felt I must ask him a question. "It's such a nice house. Are you going far away?"

"You're almost the first people to have seen it," he said. "A man did come last Sunday. A stockbroker. From Bedford. Do sit down." He tapped the seat again. "But I've heard no more. Do you know France?" he said.

He moved along the seat. Skirts were short in those days and I fancied he looked quickly at my legs as I sat down. I thought they were very nice legs and I was glad he seemed to think so, too.

"No," I said. "I don't know France. I've never been abroad."

I suppose the fact that I was watching the caterpillar with such unbroken fascination must have misled him into thinking I was staring solely at him—at any rate the bright blue eyes were continually holding mine in a shimmering, captivated smile.

"I used to live a great deal in France," he said. "Before the war. Then I came and took this place. But I find the winters very cold in this valley."

The caterpillar, I noticed, had disappeared.

"Must you go?" he said.

By that time I had really begun to enjoy the whole situation. It appealed enormously to my sense of humour to see that naked caterpillar crawling all over him and now disappearing, at last, behind his neck.

"No. I suppose I don't have to," I said. "They'll wait for me."

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" Good," he said. " Now you can tell me more about yourself."

It was beautifully dark and cool there on the river bank, under the thick poplars, and when a fish rose, just on the line of shadow, it cut the water with a curved slice of silver before it disappeared.

That was about the only thing that moved in the whole breathless afternoon for the next quarter of an hour, during which he said once, " Tell me. I've been most undecided about this house. I'm really very fond of it. But I can't exist in these freezing winters. If this were your house what would you do? "

" Do you live alone? " I said.

I don't know quite what made me say that. I suppose it's instinctive in any woman, as soon as a man appears on the scene, to try to assess whether he has attachments or not. I don't know, of course. It may not have been that. At any rate, he said, " That's another thing. I hardly see a soul from one week's end to another. Except Miss Carfax. She lives in the house next door."

" Was that Miss Carfax you were talking to? " I said.

" That was Miss Carfax."

Again I started to search his neck for the caterpillar. It was absolutely fascinating to wonder where it could have got to all that time, and I must have been so absorbed that I couldn't have realized fully how much my eyes were fixed on him.

" But let's not talk," he said, " about Miss Carfax."

Suddenly I got the impression that, with the slightest encouragement from me, he would have become emotional. His bright eyes fairly shimmered, like the heat of the afternoon.

A moment later I saw the caterpillar emerge on the other side of his coat collar. I started laughing at once, and he said, " You're a very gay person, aren't you? Are you always so gay? "

" It doesn't always do to be serious, does it? " I said, and because of the caterpillar I was still laughing.

All this, of course, may well have looked like a form of encouragement to him and suddenly he moved along the seat, a little closer to me. But then, instead of attempting to come any nearer, he merely patted my hand. It was a very brief, avuncular sort of pat, not very serious, but I drew my hand away a little haughtily and with the faintest smile. I was really thinking more of the caterpillar crawling on my own arms and shoulders, and I did not grasp, even remotely, that this quick little pat of my hand was really an expression of great shyness on his part.

I suppose youth never thinks of age as being shy. It merely thinks that a person of sixty ought long since to have got over things like that. It is impossible for the young to grasp that the pain of shyness never really leaves some people, however age may seem to give them certainty.

That, anyway, was the one and only attempt he made to pat my hand, and presently he said, " It must be rather interesting to have two fair people and two dark ones in the family. Your mother and sister on the one side and you and your father on the other."

" My father is dead," I said.

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His comment on that was, as I afterwards discovered, quite typical. " Do you miss him very much? " he said.

" Very much," I said. " Naturally."

That was another thing I had not, at that time, fully grasped. My father had died the previous summer. Shortly afterwards my sister had got engaged to Ewart Mackeson. It did not occur to me that these two events had anything to do with that sulky, adolescent sickness of mine.

" Are you on the telephone? " he suddenly said.

" Yes," I said. " Why? "

" If I sell the house I might perhaps give a little farewell party before I go away. If I do I would like to ring you up and invite you. Would you care to come? "

" Thank you," I said.

In thought, he stared at the water, still holding the branch of leaves, and I could not see the caterpillar. I still longed for it to complete the picture of fatuity by crawling up his neck, but a moment later I thought I heard voices from the direction of the mullein-strewn wilderness nearer the house, and soon they were growing louder.

" I think my mother and sister must be coming this way," I said.

Suddenly I saw that the caterpillar had appeared again. It was sitting on the far lapel of the shantung coat.

" You haven't answered my question," he said.

That is the sort of opening youth likes and I said at once, with what I thought was splendid sarcasm, " Since you ask me a new one every five seconds it's rather hard to know which question you mean."

" About the house."

Up to that moment I simply couldn't have cared one way or the other whether he sold the house or not. What on earth had I to do with the house, I thought. Then from farther up the bank I distinctly heard my sister say, " I think Ewart will rave about it, don't you? All this bit by the river. I must get him over tomorrow."

I didn't hesitate a moment longer. I simply turned and smiled at him in a calm, offhand sort of way and said, " If you mean about selling the house, I wouldn't sell it for worlds. Nothing would induce me."

I thought he seemed relieved at that, almost delighted. He actually gave me a fussy little pat on the shoulder.

" I hope you will come over to tea with me one day," he said, " while this beautiful weather lasts. I would love to show you the butterflies."

I couldn't think what on earth he was talking about. He murmured something else about not really wanting, in his heart, to part with the house and how glad he was about my turning up that day and helping him to make up his mind, and then my sister and mother arrived.

He went towards them and, still with the caterpillar sitting on

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his chest, gave a little bow, at the same time raising his panama.

"I have been talking to your charming daughter without knowing her name or telling her mine," he said. "I'm Frederick Fielding-Brown. Good afternoon."

"Mrs. George Burnett," my mother said. "Good afternoon," and I saw her suddenly look with pale startled eyes at the extraordinary spectacle of the shantung jacket and its nestling caterpillar.

"I should like to bring my fiancé over to see the house," my sister said. "I love it." My sister, seeing the caterpillar, too, looked equally startled.

"By all means," he said, "though to be perfectly honest I haven't really made up my mind finally whether to sell it or not."

Back in the car my sister was half irritated, half amused. "Stupid little man," she said. "First he wants to sell his house and then he can't make up his mind. And did you ever see anything quite so priceless? That revolting caterpillar on his coat—did you see that caterpillar?"

I only stared out of the taxi window and down the valley to where, on the river, the water-lilies were gleaming as white, entrancing, and duck-like as ever in the sun.

"I didn't see anything," I said, "and if it comes to that I think he was rather nice. He was very charming to me."

Two days later my mother was congratulating me on having at last had the good sense, as she put it, to shake myself out of myself.

"A bicycle ride will do you all the good in the world," she said. "I can't think why you haven't taken to it before. Would you like me to pack you some tea?"

"No, thank you," I said. "I'll stop in a village somewhere and get some tea."

An hour later I was sitting in the drawing-room at Orleans, taking tea with Frederick Fielding-Brown. The afternoon was hot and brilliant. The yellow venetian blinds were drawn halfway down at the windows. There was a strong sweet scent of lilies in the air.

"I didn't think you would come over so soon after my letter," he said.

Youth is not always sarcastic and sharp, and quick to see the comic side of things. Sometimes it is splendidly tactless too.

"I hadn't anything else to do," I said, "so I thought I'd just come over."

He was very tolerant about that. He smiled and asked me to help myself to tomato sandwiches. They were, I thought, very good tomato sandwiches, with rather a special flavour to them. I remarked on this flavour and felt that I was being clever when I told him I thought they were piquant.

"That's because I have a tiny touch of mayonnaise and red pepper put in them," he said. "How observant you are."

He started to pour tea from a conical silver pot, afterwards

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filling up the pot with hot water from a little silver spirit kettle.

"I don't suppose you've ever eaten caterpillars of any sort, have you?" he said.

Here we were, I thought, back in the mad-house. It was obviously going to be too screamingly funny for words. Then he began to explain. He started to remind me of the day I had first found him in the garden, talking to the caterpillar, Miss Carfax, and the hedge.

"That was a caterpillar of the goat moth," he said. "It seems the Romans ate them. Considered them quite a delicacy. I suppose in the category of frogs and snails. Or grasshoppers perhaps. What they ate them with is another matter."

"Perhaps mayonnaise," I said. There was nothing, I thought, like playing up on these occasions.

"Well, and why not?" he said. "I suppose if you were brought up on Cossus ligniperda and mayonnaise you would think no more of it, in the end, than eating winkles with vinegar and a pin."

"What is Cossus ligniperda?" I asked.

"That," he said, "is the goat moth."

Once or twice before and after this lunatic piece of conversation he remarked on what a charming companion I was and how glad he was that I had been able to come over.

"You are wearing such a pretty dress," he said. "It goes well with your dark complexion."

"Thank you," I said.

The dress was a bright clear green, lighter and softer than emerald, with short, yellow-trimmed sleeves and a yellow collar. With it I was wearing the yellow shoes that Ewart Mackeson had made for my mother. She didn't like them after all, and now, in consequence, I thought they were rather smart on me.

"What material is it?" he said. He fingered one of the sleeves. His hand brushed my bare upper arm and drew away. "A kind of silk?"

I said I thought it was rayon. By this time, however, he was looking at my shoes. He seemed entranced by them too and he peered at them a long time with absorbed brilliant blue eyes.

"You have wonderful taste," he said, "to get shoes to match like that."

This was, as best I can give it, the general tone of the afternoon. It was poised somewhere between lunacy and flattery, with a curious overtone of charm. The way he poured tea for me, helped me to sandwiches and finally to dish after dish of large dark ruby strawberries completely immersed in cream—all these things were, I suppose, quite enough to counteract, for a young girl with a fairly high opinion of herself and her beauty, a feeling that she was simply the guest of a hopeless eccentric who didn't know what day it was.

Of course I never intended to pay another visit. That would have been too much. This first time was, in a way, a sort of dare. It was simply a piece of harmless devilment on my part. The

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idea of striking up a friendship with an elderly man who seriously thought that goat moths and mayonnaise were a solemn gastronomic possibility was altogether too ludicrous for words.

And it is possible, I think, that I never should have paid another visit if it had not been for an incident that occurred after tea was over and I suddenly got up, now rather bored by that stuffy yellow-shaded drawing-room and its too oppressive fragrance of madonna lilies, and said that I ought to go.

"Oh no, please! I want you to meet Miss Carfax," he said. "Miss Carfax is coming over."

The life of Frederick Fielding-Brown and that of Miss Carfax were, as I was to discover later, about as ludicrously bound up with each other as he himself was with the business of moths and butterflies.

Every Sunday afternoon, for example, Frederick Fielding-Brown handed in his card to the house next door and formally went to tea with Miss Carfax; every Wednesday afternoon Miss Carfax handed in her card at his house and took tea with him. During the rest of the week they corresponded with each other by a series of daily notes taken to each house by hand, in his case by the garden boy, in hers by the chauffeur.

These notes pulsated warmly with urgent and stunning discoveries in the world of entomology. Sometimes they were accompanied, in Miss Carfax's case, by little perforated cardboard boxes.

Is it a treasure? she would write. *I trust so. I found it in the raspberry canes.*

In a return note he would tell her that her treasure was, after all, no more than a Painted Lady, a Red Admiral, a Tortoiseshell, or something of that sort, common to all our counties.

Miss Carfax was, however, never discouraged. Tending her garden, snipping at rambler roses, walking along the meadow paths by the river, she kept up a great vigilance for things that would interest him, secretly hoping that she would one day come upon something of rare and stupefying importance, such as a Plumed Prominent, or a Brixton Beauty.

In turn he wrote notes of discoveries whose detection she apparently found to be nothing short of magical. There would be illuminating occasions like those of the goat moth, which had made me laugh so much, or the woolly case-bearer, a species of moth of which, as he explained to me and no doubt also to Miss Carfax, the virgin females sometimes lay fruitful eggs.

The way in which these two elderly people twittered backwards and forwards to each other's houses, taking tea, writing notes, exchanging larvae, and so on, prattling passionately through the garden hedge, tremulous with discovery, was of course just the thing that a young girl would find amusing and fatuous. For the life of me I simply couldn't, I'm afraid, see what all the fuss was for.

That was why I thought Miss Carfax looked quite pathetic, almost imbecile with excitement, as she came rushing into the

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drawing-room that afternoon, carrying with trembling care a little cardboard box, saying, " I really think I have something, Frederick, I really think I've got something for you at last."

I ought to explain that, just before this happened, he had been trying to persuade me to come to tea another day. We were sitting on a narrow sofa. It was in a kind of French marquetry style and it was too high for comfort. It reminded me very much of the seat by the river and once again he started patting my hand.

" Come again, will you? While this beautiful weather lasts? Do you like raspberries? " he said.

If you can imagine an elderly man shyly patting your hand, looking intensely into your eyes, and saying, " Do you like raspberries? " you will know something of what I felt that afternoon just before Miss Carfax burst in.

Then he said, " Come early. We'll take the punt on the river. We'll go down to where the water-lilies are."

Suddenly, at the mention of water-lilies, I felt quite different about the whole affair. He seemed to me suddenly very sweet, in that avuncular attentive way of his; he was full of eager, tender charm.

" I should love to see the water-lilies," I said. " From the road they look like ducks—"

" Then you will? " he said. " You—"

I hadn't time to answer before the maid was knocking on the door and, a moment later, showing Miss Carfax into the room.

" I really think I have something—" Her hands fluttered, but I noticed that he did not seem to be looking either at them or at the little box they were holding. Instead he gave me an engaging, pitying little smile—pitying, that is, for Miss Carfax, who was so absorbed in taking the lid off the box that she didn't even know I was there.

" My dear," he said gently, " allow me to introduce Miss Burnett. Miss Carfax—Miss Burnett."

Somehow, in her fluttering struggle with the box, Miss Carfax managed to acknowledge me with a kind of unsmiling grin. I ought to have explained that she was of course old, too—that is, fifty-six or fifty-seven, I should say—with long angular teeth, straight as piano keys.

" There! " she said. " There! "

" Miss Burnett and I have had a most delightful tea together," he said. " I'm sure we ate more strawberries than were good for us, but some things are irresistible when the season's so short—"

" Look," she said. " Look, Frederick. Please look, will you? "

He was, during all this time, looking at me. Now he gave a cursory glance at the box, just in time to see a large brown-pink moth fly upwards, towards the light, and attach itself to one of the venetian blinds.

" Oh, it's gone! it's out—"

" Why don't you use the cyanide I gave you? " he said. " Either that or keep the lid on."

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Her eyes seemed to give a pained grey jolt as he said this. Her hands flapped helplessly and she said, " Can we catch it? What kind is it, Frederick? It's so huge. I thought it might be a Great Brocade—"

He laughed shortly and it seemed to stun her. She stood mute in the middle of the room.

" I'm surprised," he said. " I'm really surprised at you, dear. I think even Miss Burnett would know our common Privet Hawk."

After that, after all her excitement, she seemed to become slack and baggy. She sat down and we talked a bit. I can't think what about—more moths, I think, and how good the strawberries were. I could see, however, that she was never really listening. Her bemused eyes wandered sometimes to where the moth was folded on the venetian blinds and sometimes she sucked at her big teeth and swallowed hard so that her Adam's apple quivered.

Then, after she had gone, he actually laughed at her. " A Great Brocade," he said. " If she lives to be a hundred she'll never find a Great Brocade."

Then I said what I suppose was rather a foolish thing. " That doesn't give her very much time, does it? " I said.

Of course that was clever and quick and I must say he absolutely loved it, too. " Most amusing," he said. " But naughty. Very naughty."

" Well," I said, " isn't it nice to be naughty sometimes? "

It was that, I suppose, that set the tone for the rest of the afternoon and the future. We sat on the little sofa again and he squeezed my hand. His fingers were hot and sticky. Then I crossed my legs and pulled my skirt down over my knees, and he said, " What about tea again? Which day? We'll have masses of raspberries and cream and go to see the water-lilies afterwards."

" Which day would you like me to come? " I said.

" Whichever day you wish," he said. " All days are your days. Tomorrow—Friday, Saturday, Sunday—they're all yours. Just say."

" Sunday," I said.

So, without thinking, I went over again on Sunday. It was a warm breezy afternoon and we ate many dishes of raspberries for tea—beautiful yellow ones, I remember, as well as the ordinary kind—and afterwards, as he had promised, we took the punt and paddled slowly down the river to where the water-lilies were.

Perhaps it was the warm sleepy wind, perhaps it was the sight of occasional pairs of lovers lying in the long grasses by the waterside, or it may have been merely that funny, sensuous sort of feeling that floating on water gives you—I don't know, but that afternoon I began to lead him on a little, just for fun.

" You look very hot, paddling all the time," I said once. " Why don't we tie up the punt for a while? "

So we tied up the punt and got out and I lay down on the river bank in the tall whitening August grasses. They were so high, these grasses, as high as oats and almost the same gold-white ripe

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colour, with bowed, feathery heads of seed, that they made a wall round me where I lay on my back, staring at the sky.

Before long, as I lay there, he leaned over and, for the first time, kissed me. I didn't mind very much; nor was I very excited—that, I suppose, describes it fairly accurately. If a man of sixty wanted to kiss me on a hot July afternoon I thought that, on the one hand, it was silly to be prim about it. On the other hand, it wasn't an experience that I'd have sought deliberately as a means of pleasure.

However, some pretence of approval or disapproval had to be made and I said, "Naughty. You know that was very naughty, don't you?"

"You're so very lovely," he said. "So absolutely lovely."

"Flatterer," I said.

He started to try to kiss me again, but this time I bit my lips and made a face at him.

"You're not eating strawberries and raspberries now," I said, "and taking second helpings. It's not good for you."

"But I feel it's rather like that," he said. "I feel the season might be so short."

"Oh?" I said. "And who said the season might be short?"

Like that I teased and taunted him for the rest of the afternoon. It was great fun altogether. Sometimes I refused to let him kiss me for a quarter of an hour or twenty minutes at a time and then it was marvellous to see how terribly downcast he was. Then I would pretend I wanted to go home and he would start protesting in awful dismay until I teased him another way and laughed in his face and said, "I might as well go home as lie here and do nothing. I thought you wanted to kiss me so much? Goodness, you don't even try."

In that way we spent the rest of the afternoon, and by the time we paddled back to the house he was in a sort of daze. He had the air of a man in a mild state of intoxication. I felt a little heady too—warm from lying in the sun in breezy meadows, from the smell of water and meadowsweet, and with grains of grass seed in my hair.

Probably that was why neither of us saw Miss Carfax until the punt was actually turning round under the balsam poplars, towards the landing-stage.

"Isn't that Miss Carfax?" I said.

She was standing in the shade of the river path, in a white sun-hat, staring towards us. When she saw us she turned sharply on her heel and fairly bolted away.

"Where?" he said. "Where?"

"She's gone now," I said. "She just opened her gate and disappeared."

"Oh, my God!" he said suddenly. "I just remembered. I always go to tea with her on Sundays."

After that I suppose I went over to the house perhaps another

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dozen times or more. Twice I went to dinner. The great thing was, of course, that it took me out of myself. It was fun. I wasn't bored or sulky any more.

The second time I went to dinner it was already September. The mild misty evenings were drawing in. The weather was soft and humid and there were mushrooms in the meadows. I mention this because, earlier that evening, we actually went down to the fields and gathered mushrooms which were afterwards served on toast, as a savoury. After that we ate pears for dessert, the lovely Marie Louise variety, with little pearl-handled silver knives.

"September is a good month for moths," he said. "Would you like to go out after dinner and see what we can find?"

So presently we were walking with a torch through the mullein wilderness, past the choked raspberry canes. He stood quite still once or twice, steadily shining the torch into the darkness under fruit boughs. A desultory moth or two began to dance in the light and he said, "I didn't bring the cyanide bottle. It's hardly worth it. Mostly what you can see are common Noctuidae."

Soon I thought he seemed nervous. He kept switching on the torch and then suddenly putting it off again. One moment the air was dancing with a crowd of small light wings and the next I was groping, half blinded, for the path among the grasses.

Suddenly he put out the light for the sixth or seventh time, stopped abruptly, and took me by the shoulders.

"I want to ask you to marry me," he said. His hands were shaking dreadfully. "Will you? I know there is a great difference—but would you? Would you consider it, please?"

I simply wanted to laugh outright at him.

"Now I see," I told him, "what moth it was you hoped to find out here. The rare nocturnal Laura, eh?"

Nervously he started panting, breathing hard. "No," he said. "No. It's simply—well, I've been trying to say this for some time. Would you—would you marry me?"

"It's very sweet of you, but—"

"Would you think it over? Think it over and give me an answer another day?"

It was quite ludicrous; he was breathing hard on me, as if blowing on a hot potato.

"Oh no, really—" I started to say. "Thank you, but—" After all, I thought, what sort of encouragement had I given him to get him to the point of asking me this?

"You've kissed me very often. You've given me such a lot of pleasure," he said. "It's been six weeks since you kissed me that Sunday afternoon—"

"Yes, but kissing," I said. "Kissing is kissing and there's a great deal of difference between kissing and getting married. You're old enough to know that."

"Yes, but you see I don't know." He sounded sad and dithering. "I don't know. I don't know about these things."

"Then," I teased him, "it's time you learnt." Then, in a way,

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I felt sorry for him. I linked my arm in his and we started to walk back to the house. He did not shine the torch any more. He seemed to have forgotten it. I simply felt him groping forward intensely in the September darkness and he said, "I'm so fond of you. I love you so much. I can't explain how much I love you."

"Yes, and I'm fond of you," I said. "But—"

"I'm old. I know," he said. "Isn't that it?"

"It isn't that," I said and suddenly I arrived again at another of youth's splendid moments of tactfulness. "After all I'm only seventeen and I've got my life to think of—"

"Seventeen?" he said. "You said you were nineteen. You see, I was thinking that if you were nineteen it wouldn't be long before you came of age. The difference wouldn't seem so great then—"

"Seventeen. I was just teasing," I said.

He was absolutely silent for the rest of the way back to the house. Then he had hardly arrived there before the maid, Mabel, came in with a note on a silver salver.

"With Miss Carfax's compliments, sir," she said.

He read the note, crumpled it up, and threw it in the fireplace.

"Miss Carfax is going away for a few days," he said, "and thinks that I ought to know." He took my hands and held them in his, together. "Good-bye, my dear. I don't suppose you'll be coming to see me again, will you? After this?"

"Oh, good gracious," I said, "why not? Of course I'm coming to see you. That's if you ever ask me."

"Ask you?" he said. "Oh, my God, ask you?" And presently in that awfully sweet nervous way of his he was kissing my hands.

Five days later I went over to see him on the last visit I ever made.

It began to rain sharply and heavily that afternoon as I bicycled the last mile or so to the house. By the time I arrived, my dress, my stockings, and my hair were soaking.

"You must go up at once and take a bath," he said, "and put on a dressing-gown. You mustn't catch cold whatever you do. Mabel will dry your things. Come down when you've finished, and hot tea and toast will be ready."

There is a wonderful sensation of luxury about taking a hot bath on a dull afternoon with rain streaming down on the windows outside, but I am not sure it is not equalled by putting on, afterwards, a more luxurious dressing-gown than you own. It was probably because of this that I spent a long time over that bath and afterwards drying and brushing and setting my hair. All this time the rain streamed down on the windows and it must have been nearly five o'clock by the time I went downstairs.

I forgot to say, by the way, how full that house was of moths and butterflies. Mostly they were kept in mahogany cabinets with long sliding drawers. But they were also mounted, separately or in small selected groups, in glass-covered cases that hung about the walls like pictures.

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I used sometimes to ask if he hadn't every single native species among all the hundreds that lay in the drawers and hung on the walls and up the stairs, but he would say, "Well no, not quite every one. You see I make it a point of honour only to mount those I've collected myself. You can buy specimens of the rarest things of course but it really isn't the same. The thrill isn't there."

As I went downstairs that afternoon, wearing the heavy silk dressing-gown he had lent me, I stopped once or twice to look at the cases hanging all down the walls on either side of the stairs. I think they were mostly common species that hung there but even among the commonest there are some of the most beautiful, and I was looking at a group of meadow browns I hadn't seen before when, from the drawing-room, I suddenly heard voices.

It was not only because the door was open a little but because the voices had begun slightly to raise their pitch that I heard them more clearly as I came to the foot of the stairs.

"It's merely a point of honour with me, that's all," I heard him say.

"You mean you won't accept it?" It was Miss Carfax speaking and her voice was sharp and thin. "Is that it?"

"My dear—"

"Or is it just that you won't accept it from me? Perhaps that's it?" she said.

"Not at all," he said. "It's simply that I never mount—"

"You do know what it is, I suppose, don't you?" she said. Her voice was growing tauter. "You've hardly even looked at it."

"Of course I know what it is," he said. "It's a Queen of Spain Fritillary."

"Is it rare? I heard you say once—"

"It's rare in this country," he said, "but not in France. I had scores of specimens in France but when the war came I left them there."

"I heard you say once you hadn't got one," she said. "I remembered the name so well. I thought the name was so beautiful. Now it seems you had hundreds. Well, scores—"

"But not British," he said. "A British specimen—"

"This *is* British!" she said. "That is the whole point of it! I understood that!" Her voice was rising towards breaking pitch, thin with anger. "I took great care about that—that was why I bought it for you. Don't you understand? It was just a little present I thought I should like to bring back for you—"

At that moment she opened the door. I heard him begin to say, "Look, my dear. I appreciate all that. That I appreciate—" when she turned and saw me standing in the hallway outside.

For a moment or two she couldn't speak. Her mouth opened itself and stuck there in a stiff, long-toothed gap, painfully ludicrous and paralysed. Behind her, Frederick Fielding-Brown appeared and began to say, "Miss Burnett got caught in the rain—"

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and then got no further. She suddenly turned and gave a sort of hysterical hiss into his face. It was the sort of sound that cats make when they spit at each other, and then she shouted, "I wonder if you're quite so particular about accepting what she has to give you? Do you make that a point of honour, I wonder?"

The front door slammed a moment later. It was all so innocent on my part, my being there in the dressing-gown, that I wanted to howl with laughter. How absolutely and madly idiotic the old could make themselves look, I thought, and then I saw that Frederick Fielding-Brown, still clutching the handle of the drawing-room door, was white and shaking.

"Come in and sit down," he said. "That has upset me." His voice was quite sepulchral. "She came just as tea arrived. Now we must ring for more toast. Would you ring?" he asked me. "My hands are shaking. The toast is cold."

It was nearly a week later when my mother, after supper, sat reading the local evening paper. My sister and Ewart Mackeson had at last found themselves a suitable house in which to live. It was nicely gabled, with much ivy growing on the walls, an important-looking coach-house with a weathercock, an acre or two of rabbit shooting, a tradesman's entrance, and a tennis-court. My sister was quite crazy about the tennis-court and the prospect of giving garden parties there, and every evening now, she and Ewart Mackeson would be over at the house, measuring it for carpets and curtains.

"Wasn't that house called Orleans?" my mother said. "The one we went to see?"

"Yes," I said.

"An awful thing has happened," she said, "if that's the same house. Was that gentleman's name Carfax? Didn't he live there with his sister?"

"No," I said. "His name was Fielding-Brown."

"That's right. Then it is the same," she said. "It's here. Listen. It says that a Miss Gertrude Carfax was found dead by the river there last Sunday and that her body was first discovered by her friend and neighbour from Orleans, the residence next door."

Before I could say anything my mother began to read the coroner's report. "Cyanide," she said. "How dreadful. What a dreadful thing. She killed herself with cyanide."

I stayed in my room for several days after that, in what my mother said was one of my old, inexplicable, maddening fits of sulking.

"If you are going to start that again," she said, "I warn you that I won't put up with it. You will go and stay with your aunt at Southsea for a week or two. You can get some sea air inside you and plenty of exercise and see what that will do. Once and for all, I will not have that sulking."

One of the parts of the world that has not changed much in

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over thirty years is that wide stretch of river in the valley of the Ouse. Like so much else, of course, it has changed a little. The house called Orleans, for example, has a different name. Whoever owns it calls it The Prospect now. They have also cut back the limes, cleared away the old mullein wilderness, and laid steep well-mown lawns that run right down to the huge balsam poplars by the riverside.

But on the whole it has not changed much. And in summer, now that I am almost as old as Miss Carfax, which of course is not really old as we think of age today, I like to go and look at it. I like to stand on the high road above the valley and stare down at the water-lilies that are so much like white ducks, the crowds of little blue and amber butterflies that tremble about the grass seed, and the lovers who lie in the meadows, not caring if they are seen, on Sunday afternoons.

And as I do so I remember, always, the Queen of Spain Fritillary.

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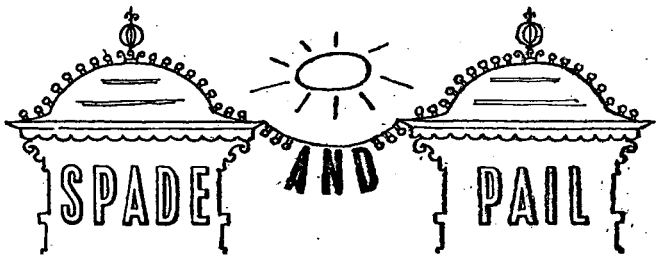

Blue as the gendarmerie were
the waves of the sea

EDITH SITWELL

The sun was shining on the sea
Shining with all his might:
He did his very best to make
The billows smooth and bright . . .

The sea was wet as wet could be,
The sands were dry as dry.
You could not see a cloud, because
No cloud was in the sky.

LEWIS CARROLL

Nice Sit-Down

All along the pebble slopes in deck-chairs sat the older people; enormous Mums in dark dresses printed with small white flowers, fat Dads with walrus moustaches . . . Aunties cackling with sudden laughter at young Derek or our Shirley, Mrs. Whosit from up the road with her little lot who'd joined up with us for the day, like; old Jim and old Perce and Ern and Wally and Stan and the beer; and hundreds of other fifty- and sixty- and seventy-year-old human bodies, lying comfortably back with the sun and the faint salt wind burning their faces; those knobbly English faces that have been affectionately and unflatteringly compared by an American visitor to potatoes.

Here were the dear, the well-beloved people of England enjoying themselves and their holyday as they used to do when Chaucer walked among them . . . enjoying themselves with roars of laughter and jokes about bottoms and babies and feet, and being at the same time so cheerful and kind and completely helpless that the heart almost broke with love as it contemplated them.

Along the narrow concrete promenade in front of the bunga-

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lows the feeling was more elegant. Here the young beauties strolled in twos and threes, wearing thin frocks of artificial silk in brilliant colours and white toeless sandals, their thick shining hair swept up in ornate curls . . . The sun burned down, white and grey gulls flashed and turned above, and dancing music from dozens of wirelesses sounded gaily through the soft monotonous poetry of the waves and the sharp roar of human voices.

STELLA GIBBONS, *The Rich House*

Beach Games

Old Euclid drew a circle
On a sand-beach long ago.
He bounded and enclosed it
With angles thus and so.
His set of solemn greybeards
Nodded and argued much
Of arc and of circumference,
Diameter and such.
A silent child stood by them
From morning until noon
Because they drew such charming
Round pictures of the moon.

VACHEL LINDSAY, *Euclid*

Sandwork

Desultory, amateurish pond-making was practised by many of the Anchorstone children: their puny, half-hearted, untidy attempts were, in Hilda's eyes, a disgrace to the beach. Often, so little did they understand the pond-making spirit, they would wantonly break down their own wall for the pleasure of watching the water go cascading out. And if a passer-by mischievously trod on the bank they saw their work go to ruin without a sigh. But woe betide the stranger who, by accident or design, tampered with Hilda's rampart! Large or small, she gave him a piece of her mind.

L. P. HARTLEY, *The Shrimp and the Anemone*

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Morning Swim

If any seafaring person, such as a yachtsman, were to sail round the corner of Watkyns Bay in the morning, he would find large numbers of children playing in the water, and would be either pleased or depressed at the sight according to the way his nature was originally formed. Certainly he would wonder how they came to be there, in such a lonely place and so very much at home, the little ones splashing about in the shallow parts and chasing each other over the sand, and the bigger ones swimming out to rafts and diving from them, and all shouting and squeaking. But this is a case of supposing, for no yacht or any other vessel will ever round the corner of the bay.

E. A. WYKE-SMITH, *The Marvellous Land of Snergs*

Out For A Sail Out

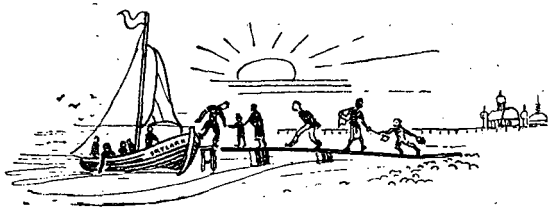
Give me your sandshoes, Charlie,
Give me your pail—
Dad-says the Skylark's going
Out for a sail.

Out for a sail out, Charlie,
Over the bay,
Pick up the swimsuits, ducky,
And put them away.

Dad's got the tickets, Charlie,
And a packet of Players,
It's after your bedtime really
But nobody cares—

Holidays don't come often,
Bother the clock—
Rockabye baby, Charlie,
Peppermint rock.

ROSIE LEE, *Out in the Skylark*



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MOONSHINE

" Howdy, Sheriff," they said agreeably
—the antennae waved back

BY RUTH M. GOLDSMITH

THE day Ocie Powell's whisky still blew up it brought down two ducks headed back north and an Ix spaceship that had been gliding low. Only the ducks were lucky enough to drop out of sight for good and miss the rest of the confusion.

For a time Ocie and his partners, Lee Oliver and Ranse Hawkins, lay where they landed in a clump of palmettos. In the circumstances it was pleasant to rest there, even necessary. They'd found the cooking-off hot and tiring and tedious, and had offered these findings to each other as reasons for sampling the result—until they got beyond giving reasons. Then they'd just kept on sampling.

When they opened their eyes now the twisted pine branches above revolved round them. When they closed their eyes they revolved round themselves.

But the Ixians, glassy-green, four-legged, and two-headed, climbed out of their ship and set out determinedly to locate the disturbance that had brought them down.

The three men waited, patiently and peaceably, for the world to right itself, until the sound of tramping feet bothered them into raising their heads. The site had been chosen with an eye to the view. On a clear day and with normal vision they could see far across the level ground with its meagre scattering of tall, straight-trunked pines—far enough in every direction to give them plenty of time to leave in case someone they didn't feel like welcoming was coming.

They saw the Ixians, some distance away, spread out fanwise and moving towards them. The Florida sun sparkled sharply off the approaching figures, and the three looked around for their flat-topped cowboy hats and pulled them low over their eyes.

" Looks like the sheriff's bought hisself some uniforms," Ocie said.

" Man, they sure are *bright*," Lee said. " They must've raised the fines to pay for that outfit."

" We'd better be getting out of here," Ocie said.

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Spanish moss hung still on the branches, and mash dripped slowly down, as they studied the possibilities. It meant getting up and going over to the truck, starting it up—which might be difficult because it was an ageing and ailing machine—and then bouncing over the open ground until they came to the road. It was an energetic measure.

On the other hand, as Ranse Hawkins finally decided, "We stay still, maybe they won't find us."

The feet tramped steadily nearer. Ocie found the funnel on the ground near him and, holding it to his eye like a telescope, peeked out once through the palmetto fans and spotted the antennae on top of the green heads. "Walkie-talkie," he whispered disgustedly, shoving the funnel in his pocket. "That ain't hardly playing fair."

The antennae bent and pointed to where the men were hidden, and quivered at each other. The feet trudged a little more and stopped. The three could hear better than they could see, and they knew that they'd been ringed in.

They got up sheepishly, hands in the air.

"Howdy, Sheriff," they said pleasantly, swaying slightly towards the newcomers.

The delicate antennae swayed silently back at them.

It was a little interplanetary misunderstanding: a sheriff, like everyone else, and perhaps most especially a sheriff, ought to be friendly enough to speak when he's spoken to, but the Ixians couldn't communicate except by their antennae. Otherwise, they might right now be receiving honours for concluding a successful expedition.

Having waved a cordial how-do-you-do with their antennae, they started moving off in the direction from which they'd come, back towards their grounded spaceship, convinced that they could not pursue this investigation further and would have to mark the spot on their maps as a place to be avoided.

Ocie and Lee and Ranse moved with them, hands still in the air, but rapidly losing their peaceableness and patience.

It was an odd procession. At the head, the Ixians, puzzled but still trudging, were zipping messages back and forth while the three men brought up a somewhat threshing tail—Ocie plump and looking plumper because he always stuffed things in his pockets, the other two long and lean and a little springy at the knees. The men were preoccupied with the affront of not having their greeting returned; and with their heads down to keep out the glare, they didn't even notice they were at the rear.

The sight of the spaceship rubbed salt into their wounded feelings. "Wasting the taxpayers' money on newfangled

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swamp-buggies," Lee complained indignantly, "instead of spending it on paving the roads."

"That's what comes of putting the wrong men in office," Ocie said. He'd been about to climb in the hatch, but he swung round abruptly. He was so mad he threw the first thing that came to hand—the funnel—against the side of the ship, and didn't even notice how the antennae recoiled from the sharp sound.

"Sheriff," he said slowly, "there ain't *me*, nor nobody else in my family, ever going to vote for *you* again."

Darkness engulfed them inside the ship, and the only sound was of their own heavy breathing. It was a place where anyone who was going to have misgivings would have them, and Lee said, "I ain't so sure that was the sheriff. Looked a little different somehow."

"If they were federal men they should have said so," Ocie said, still hot under the collar. "By heaven, I'm going to ask them. They ain't got no right not to talk to me." He started up, but the ship lurched and it was too late then for doubt to rescue anybody. They blacked out as the ship took off.

A boxlike room with metal walls and no windows, a single door with a grille, dim light over all—that was what the three saw when they came to. They raised themselves carefully to sitting positions and reached for the makings of cigarettes.

"'Tain't the county gaol," Ocie said, authoritatively.

"It's some place," Ranse said, trying to hold the little cigarette paper steady in his hand, "that makes tobacco act like them Mexican jumping beans."

"Must be a federal prison," Lee said.

Ocie twisted the end of his cigarette slowly. "They can't put us in no federal prison—not without a fair trial, they can't." But the words were quiet; there was no strength left for fiery indignation.

It was at this moment that an Ixian appeared at the grille. Silently and soberly they looked at it and saw a green creature with two heads and four legs, and something sprouting from the top of the heads. A set of retractable arms reached out to grasp the grille as the creature pressed close to get a good look.

"Foreigners," Ocie said, over a dry throat.

"Enemies of the United States," Ranse concluded.

They'd been captured, that much they remembered. Usually they weren't. Among other reasons, they set up stills to show their spirit; they knew of the days when, it was said, every self-respecting man had a still, and by tradition they resented being told what to do or what not to do.

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It was spirit that made them open their throats now, as they sat with their backs to the wall, and cut loose with the rebel yell; but it was fright that made their yell so fiendishly shrill.

There was nowhere for the shrieks to go except out of the grille, and there stood the green creature who couldn't talk, couldn't hear, except by means of his sensitive antennae.

The antennae recoiled, then started a long slow slide down the Ixian's foreheads. He fell away from the door and groped back to his companions. Hospitalized and nourished, he'd regain his faculties, but the wound was serious enough to put the green creatures in a cleft stick.

Their instructions on leaving Ix had run more or less: Think. Think. *Think.* Establish satellite to revolve round Earth, concealed from detection. Gather information by instrument from satellite and by trips to Earth—analyse, correlate. Avoid provoking incident, but take specimens when possible without arousing suspicion. Think. Think. *Think.*

They'd followed their instructions to the letter because obedience was second nature to them. It had happened that one of the ships sent out to explore had been accidentally brought to Earth, and that some of the inhabitants had climbed aboard very willingly and accompanied them back to the base. As researchers they were inordinately pleased with the specimens; and with the inborn stubbornness of researchers, they didn't intend to be pried loose easily from the chance of gaining information from them. But the specimens had suddenly turned dangerous enough to put the whole undertaking in jeopardy.

They sent an urgent query back to Ix asking what to do with the specimens, and decided that while waiting for an answer they would treat them with the great courtesy and respect due to the best thinkers, the greatest honour that could be accorded on Ix.

By the time two more of the Ixians had suffered the loss of antennae, due to the rebel yell, they divined that these particular thinkers didn't like to do their thinking in a small locked room.

So the door of the cell swung open and Ocie, Lee, and Ranse settled their cowboy hats on their heads in a manner that spoke of grim determination, and walked out as though they had holsters at the hip. The Ixians bowed respectfully as they came.

"Looks like the googies is trying to be friendly," Ocie said. They'd taken to calling their captors the googies because of the sound the padded feet of the Ixians made when they walked—like walking in shoes full of water. But the sudden friendliness didn't turn their heads, and they countered it by just touching their hands to the big brims of their hats; their eyes stayed watchful.

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With pride gleaming through their deference, the Ixians showed them the large laboratory where they weighed, measured, analysed, and recorded information about Earth and its life. It didn't interest their newest specimens at all. They had no reason to recognize the results of the studies and looked with suspicion even at such simple things as the Ixian equivalents of Bunsen burners and calculators.

The gardens were better. The plants grew in something like soil and were irrigated by what might be water. The googies offered them food, and they ate and found it filling. "This ain't bad," Ocie said. He was partial to sweets and starches and he was eating something that tasted awfully sweet, though it looked like eggplant, and something that looked like wheat but tasted like corn.

"I'd rather have a dish of okra or turnip greens or black-eye peas," Lee said.

"There's plenty, anyway," Ranse said. "We won't go hungry."

The food did lull them, though, and made the shock of their next discovery that much worse. Urged persistently towards the scanner, they finally made out enough to realize that that was Earth way down there. Then someone let out a low whistle that made the googies step back apprehensively.

Ocie pointed to the far-off Earth and pointed to himself and the others and made motions of flying by flapping his arms. Relieved and happy, uncomprehending, the googies waved their antennae wildly in return.

"Looks like we're going to have to *fight* our way out of here," Ocie said.

"We fight our way out of here"—Ranse shook his head—"and we're in for a right smart *drop*."

The three returned to their cell by preference. They studied all round their problem but couldn't think up a way of getting back to Earth.

"It never rains but it pours," Ocie said, searching his pockets. "Getting treed by a bunch of foreigners and now I don't know where my tobacco is." He brought something out of his pocket but it wasn't tobacco. It was yeast, and then the plan came together, just naturally.

"Eggplant sweet as sugar," Lee said.

"Something that tastes like corn must *be* like corn," Ocie said.

"Plenty of equipment in that place where they work," Ranse said, getting up and pushing his hat back to a jaunty angle.

The Ixians were pleased to see their specimens making use of

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their facilities and settling down to study. They came over to watch whenever they could spare a minute from their own work, and admired the extremely careful attention the three gave to their operations. They felt a sort of dry-as-dust affinity for the experimenters, and hoped to learn a great deal.

They did. The result of the studies wasn't good but it was whisky—clear, scalding, and with powerful effect on the googies. "Why, they got a skinful," Ocie remarked in astonishment, "just from dipping their sprouts in the stuff."

And considerably later, Ranse said wearily, "I never seen anyone get such a *long* jag from just such a little."

Picture the poor Ixians, precision workers of the cosmos, who always measured by the finest lines of the instrument, always calculated to more places than was necessary, always checked and rechecked results like little victims of compulsive-behaviour complexes—picture the Ixians, freed for the first time from the burden of being exact!

They sent Ix a report that Earth was the most amazing thing they'd ever seen; that it doubled itself and bounced in its orbit; that it defied description; and, finally, that they couldn't bear to *think* about it. The ships that were supposed to go to Earth would sometimes go there and sometimes just race each other through space like hotrods.

Anxious queries ticked in from Ix, but all these were torn from the machine without being read, folded into miniature spaceships, and sent sailing. For the three master distillers the Ixians felt nothing but goodwill sprinkled with prankish affection, slapping them on the back with their antennae and tugging their big hats down over their eyes whenever they came near. So Ocie and the others forgot about trying to talk to them, and stayed in their cell as much as possible.

"Well," Ocie said by way of consolation, "it was good whisky, anyway."

"Yep," Lee said, "and it sure was nice not having to watch for the sheriff while we was cooking off."

"It sure was," Ocie said.

"It sure was," Ranse said slowly, and by then the plan had come together, just naturally.

"You can talk googie better than us," Lee said to Ocie. "You got more padding, so you can listen to them better. You can talk them into taking you down and bringing you back. It ain't as though they was losing us for good."

The understanding of the googies had expanded amazingly. They landed Ocie near the wreckage of the still and he signalled for them to wait, and drove off to town in the truck.

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It was while he was in the store buying twenty cases of fruit jars that he had the bad luck to run into the sheriff. " Howdy, Ocie," the sheriff said. " That's a powerful lot of fruit jars for a single man to be buying."

" It sure enough is, Sheriff," Ocie said. " And I'll swear that's just what I told my friend when he asked me to get them for him. But he's courting this widow woman and he's just got a notion that if he takes round these fruit jars, and some fruit and vegetables for her to put up in them, she'll just naturally ask him round to help eat them."

" I'm real glad to hear that, Ocie," the sheriff said. " Real glad. I'd sure hate to come along, just doing my duty, and find you using them jars for something illegal."

" If I was you I wouldn't waste no time looking, Sheriff," Ocie advised him honestly, " 'cause you ain't likely to find me."

All the same, when Ocie went back on the satellite and told of the meeting, the three agreed they'd better delay the first delivery to Earth while the sheriff had time to hunt and not find.

When they were finally ready to go, another batch was ready for cooking off. They instructed the googies in the intricate process and left three of them to tend to it. But they didn't realize what a fine time the googies were having being irresponsible for a change.

The Ixians landed them on Earth again with their load and they transferred the fruit jars full of whisky from the ship to the truck and covered them with a tarpaulin. Lee and Ranse sat in the cab with Ocie, and the happy Ixians sat on the load and on the tailboard, swinging their legs.

They liked the feel of the cool dark air flowing by their antennae, and the unpredictable bouncing of the truck made the green creatures merry. They laughed at the way foliage and telegraph poles rushed into the beam of the right headlight and then vanished. There were things on Earth they never knew existed.

The three Ixians left on the satellite suspected they were missing a lot of fun and took off to join the others. The fire under the cooker was left to itself.

A patrol car, parked at a crossroads, signalled the truck to stop. " Your left headlight is out," the trooper said, coming up to the cab.

" Officer," Ocie said, " I'm aiming to get that fixed soon's I get to town."

" Let's see your licence," the trooper said sternly, playing his flashlight into the cab of the truck.

Ocie started searching his pockets. " I got it right here somewhere," he said.

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The trooper took a step to the rear and played his flashlight over the back of the truck. The Ixians sparkled and shone in the beam. All those heads and legs were green, glittering, and unnerving. But the Ixians saw only a man and they were full of goodwill towards men. Antennae whipped out to slap him on the back; arms reached out and pulled his big-brimmed trooper's hat down snugly over his eyes.

Ocie accelerated and took the next turning back the way they'd come.

There was a mysterious flash in the sky that night that some people are still wondering and talking about. But the three guessed what had happened when they found the googies who'd been left to tend the cooking-off waiting by the other ships.

" The still must have blowed up," Lee said.

" It must have blowed the whole place up with it," Ocie said, " and that's a pity 'cause that was a right nice spot. We ain't likely to find as pretty a one again soon."

" Maybe they can piece it together again," Ranse said, " afterwards. Right now, we got to get this stuff hid."

" We'll bury it under the path," Ocie said. " The law'll never think of looking for it there."

They'd only started to dig when the sound of approaching feet stopped them.

But it wasn't the patrol, nor the sheriff and his deputies, nor agents of the State Beverage Department or the Federal Alcohol Tax Unit. For the first time in Ixian history a police force had been sent out to bring back an expedition.

The police bowed slightly and began a rapid quizzing of the renegades with their antennae. Sobering, the googies answered falteringly; and sobered, they waved their antennae sadly towards their friends and set off obediently with their police.

The three returned to their digging.

" They'll probably just get fines, maybe suspended," Ocie said, trying not to feel so bad.

The sound of the shovels was all that was heard for a while; then Ocie said, " I ain't ordinarily a drinking man, but it'd be a shame to bury *all* these jars after what we been through."

" It sure would," Lee said.

" It sure would," Ranse said.

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ETERNAL CITY

Rome—why yes, Elmer, wasn't Rome the place we lost the luggage?
Anonymous tourist, overheard at London Airport

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MURDER FISH

A fat black body panicked past me like a bat out of hell

BY JOHN KRUSE

I GUESS really that I should never have got up that morning. If I had stayed in bed and kept in bed maybe nothing would have happened. One glance out of my shack window at the leaden-looking dawn should have been enough. There had been lightning in the night, and the dawn atmosphere on that part of the Ceylon west coast was as hot and moist as a butcher's armpit.

But, as it was, I dragged myself down to the sea and flopped in, let the tide stir me round for a minute while I put on my fins and mask, then, trailing my spear-gun, struck out lazily for the reef.

I should have known it would be a rotten day for spearing. But no—I had to find it out the hard way. I had swum halfway to the reef, through water that was a little clearer than milk, and dodged about a thousand jellyfish, before it finally got through to me. There were whitefins farther out, and a man can go crazy in cloudy water worrying about shark.

I came back. I was sitting in the undertow, slinging my fins up onto the sand, before I saw the crowd.

When I had left half an hour before, the hotel beach, farther along, had been empty. Now, upwards of a hundred people were standing about the small rocky bay. They seemed to be intent on a fishing-outrigger, crewed by two natives, which was paddling around the inlet. One of the natives was peering down into the water through a sponging-glass.

The crowd had that hushed, shocked look I had seen once round a mine pithead back home, and I knew right away something bad had happened. I went along and asked a group of Sinhalese fishermen what was up.

"A mem-sahib from the hotel," one of them said.

"Drowned?"

"Not drowned. Taken."

"Taken!" I asked him by what.

The fisherman shrugged. "She was swimming and she vanished. That's all I know."

I looked along to where Billy Beechum, the hotel proprietor,

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was fussing round a grey-haired woman in a sun-dress. She was probably a relative of the girl who had disappeared, I thought. She had just that kind of expression—very white about the mouth, brittle. Billy was fidgeting the ring around on his plump hand, but she was acting as if he didn't exist.

I knew what was worrying Billy Beechum. This sort of thing could kill a hotel stone-dead. People came here for the swimming. The word had only to get round that this was a dangerous beach and his clientele would drift away in less time than it takes to medium-boil an egg. This was the second death here in two months. Hit-and-run stuff, probably—shark, coming right in, made bold by the murky water. Nothing one could do anything about, short of fixing a net. It was tough, I thought, looking at the woman. She was holding herself together pretty well. Tough on fat Billy. Tough on everyone.

I watched a bit longer. Presently the outrigger put in to shore. In ones and twos the hotel people began to move away. Whatever had got the girl had got all of her. I turned, with a nasty taste in my mouth, and sweated it back through the steamy heat to my hut.

I had been in there less than ten minutes when a voice behind me said, " Master? " It was a barefoot waiter from the hotel. " Master, please. Mr. Beechum want to speak with you."

Here we go—panic, I thought. It was too hot to get mixed up in one of Billy's panics. I thought of refusing; but Billy was a friend of mine.

I sighed. " O.K."

Slipping on a pair of pants and a shirt, I went with the waiter along the beach to the Grand Hotel.

Billy's office was large and bare. Overhead a pair of big fans whisked the dead air about hopelessly.

Billy Beechum stopped in mid stride and came towards me. He had his glasses in his good hand like a captive butterfly. He came right up to me, blinking short-sightedly. " Mike! Something terrible has happened."

" Yes," I said, " I know."

" That poor woman—I didn't know what to say to her. It was her niece, you know. Devilish business. I asked you to come up, Mike. We've got to do something."

" I told you what to do before."

" I know, but—hell, do you know how much a net would cost? I've had the place only six months. Three-quarters of everything I make goes to the Building Society. Until I get established I'm on my uppers, Mike."

Billy had bought the Grand Hotel with the last cent he

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possessed. This was the sink-or-swim period for him. I guessed that was why he was in such a panic now. If he lost custom at this juncture all his hard-earned cash would go down the drain. Down there on the beach I hadn't realized just how important this affair of the girl could turn out to be. Now it came home to me and it worried me. Billy had been a good friend to me. A year ago he had used his influence and paid all my legal expenses to squash an attempt to have me deported for vagrancy. I owed him a lot.

"Tell me exactly what happened," I said.

"Thought you knew. This lady, Mrs. Mowat, says she was sitting reading outside the changing-rooms. Her niece—pretty girl, awfully pretty girl—was swimming in the bay. Suddenly Mrs. Mowat looked up and she was gone—gone without a trace. What could have done it, Mike?"

"Was she near the rocks?"

"I don't think so. In the middle, I understood."

"Might have been cramp."

"Oh, come now. Without a sound, just like that?"

"Maybe not." I scratched my head. "If she wasn't near the rocks it couldn't have been octopus. Shark is my guess. Shark or a jewfish."

Billy's eyes popped open. "What's that?"

"Big, ugly fish. They swallow things by suction. The green ones will attack anything. A really big one coming up under a person could suck them straight down."

Billy shuddered. He pushed his face close to mine. "Well, I think there's one in the bay!"

I told him I didn't think a jewfish would come into a busy bay like that. Billy ducked his face down. He came up wearing his glasses.

"I do. Exactly the same thing happened to that child the other month. Identical. I think there's something big in that bay. And I want you to get it out."

I said: "Hmm. I'll take a look in there for you, Billy, if it'll make you happy. Tomorrow, if the water clears."

"Not tomorrow. Today. Now! You don't understand—I've got to have something to show the clients. 'Here it is—we've killed it—now you can go in there and bathe to your hearts' content.' Don't you see, tomorrow will be too late. They'll have started to leave."

"Then you'd better tot up their bills for them. I'm not going in there today. Holding my spear-gun at arm's length under water this morning, I could just about see the tip. What you're asking is a tall enough order in clear water. I'm not Superman,

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you know. I'm just a guy who spears fish for a living. You've seen the fish I shoot. They mostly run about ten pounds. Every once in a while I shoot one weighing sixty or seventy and they give me plenty of trouble."

"Nonsense! How about that twelve-foot shark you—"

"That, Billy, was a matter of life and death."

He was right up against me, his breath making fat, desperate sounds in his nostrils. "So is this."

I stared at him. I saw his point.

"I'll give you fifty quid."

"I don't want your money, Billy. I tell you—"

"A hundred."

I hauled back and straightened my eyes out. That was folding money.

"You're kidding," I said.

Billy pressed his lips together. He went over to the desk, took his cheque-book, and wrote out a cheque. He showed it to me.

I took it and looked at it. Sure was pretty. I tore it up.

"O.K.," I sighed. "If you're that worried, I'll go."

Billy watched the little bits flutter to the ground stupidly; jerked his eyes up to mine. "Mike!" he cried, his face wrinkling delightedly. He grabbed my hand and pumped it. "You're a gentleman!"

"Gentlemen must be suckers," I said.

Twenty minutes later I was standing thigh-deep in the waters of the bay. I had my steel hand-spear and a coil of shark line. One end of the cord was fixed to the head of the harpoon; the other to a palm tree on the beach. I was still a bit dazed about the whole thing.

Billy was leaning over the rail outside the changing-rooms. His face was suitably grim. He raised one thumb.

I made a wry face and pulled on the mask. I thumbed the schnorkel under my lips and launched myself. I beat slowly out into the bay, paying out the line as I went.

The white sand beneath me became rocks, dead-looking in the bad light. A few small-fry flaked away from in front of me. The rocks heaved up and down for about twenty feet, then suddenly dropped away.

I hung there in the grey fog, looking down into the darkness. Something seemed to open up inside me and let the draught in. I was pretty sure there was nothing down there, but it gave me a bad feeling just the same.

I couldn't see anything.

I checked where I was with the shore. Right in the centre of

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the bay. Well, here goes, I thought. I took in a load of air, and dived.

I went down vertically for about thirty feet. It was fog all the way. The pressure squeezed the mask in against my face. Something began to sort itself out ahead of me. It was the bottom—rock laced with tongues of sand. I levelled off and worked over it cautiously, trying to look in all directions at once.

It was gloomy down there. There weren't many fish. A few " cats " were browsing along the bottom, trailing their whiskers in the sand. They ignored me stolidly.

Suddenly, looming above me, I saw the shelf. Under the overhang there was a big black hole. I tried to see into it, but there wasn't enough light. It was just the sort of place where a big fish might lie up. I couldn't pass it over—and live with myself afterwards.

I surfaced uneasily and rested for a few moments. Then I took in another load of air and went back down.

The hole was about the size of a big doorway. I pushed the spear out ahead of me and, scooping the water upward with my hand to keep me down, edged in.

At first nothing happened. The hole was a lot deeper than the spear was long. I had to go right in.

Suddenly something seemed to explode in my face. I fought with it, twisted round, lost a lot of air, threshed back to the entrance, the thought filling my mind: octopus!

A fat black body panicked past me and away into the fog like a bat out of hell. A grouper. The relief nearly choked me. I got out and surfaced quickly, my heart doing crazy things inside me.

When I got up I hadn't enough air left to blow out the schnorkel. I took in a lot of water and started coughing. I lay in the water coughing and cursing.

After a while I went down again. I worked along under the shelf. Then I worked down one side of the bay; then the other side. It was a slow, nerve-racking job in the murk.

With every shape that loomed up in front of me there was a moment of tension before it resolved itself. I could hear fish that I couldn't see. I kept hearing the rustling flight of what must have been a big shoal of salpas; but I never caught one golden glint of them.

Presently I started lacing backwards and forwards across the bottom of the bay. There were long patches of weed down there. The first one I hit I thought was a shark. But there was nothing.

At last I waded up onto the beach, coiling in the line. Half a dozen people from the hotel were watching from the sand by this time. Billy Beechum came hurrying down to meet me

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" Nary a thing! " I called out.

" But you didn't go over anything like all of it, did you? " he said loudly.

" I most certainly—"

" No, you didn't," he cried out. " There were a number of places you missed. I was watching."

" Look—"

" You'll do them later, won't you? I expect you're tired now." He was talking very loudly and oddly. " You'll come back after lunch, won't you? We'll all come back after lunch and do it properly."

He put his arm round my shoulder as I came up out of the water. " I've got to kid them," he said under his breath. " You'll do it this afternoon? " he shouted. " Splendid! "

I untied the line from round the tree without saying anything and started back for my hut. Billy trotted beside me.

" Don't be angry," he said. " I had to do it. Don't you see—we can't tell them there's nothing down there. It wouldn't make any difference. We've got to *show* them something. You're sure there was nothing? "

" Sure as one can be."

" Oh my lord. What are we to do? Listen, Mike—"

" No."

" What? "

" I said no. Too much is enough. I've done what you asked. Now I'm going home to have a long drink and cool off."

Billy looked at me. " This isn't like you, Mike."

" No," I admitted. " It's not. But there's something about today I don't like. Maybe it's the weather. Maybe I'm just getting old."

" Don't let me down, Mike," Billy said. " I wouldn't ask you if there was any other way out. I'd do it myself if I could swim."

I sighed. " What was it you were going to say? "

" I was going to say, if there's nothing in the bay, couldn't we catch something somewhere else and drag it to the bay—something big enough to have killed the girl—anchor it somehow on the bottom, and then—fish it up? "

I stared at him and then laughed. " Brother! You really are desperate, aren't you? Of all the cock-eyed notions! Where in the name of heaven do you think I'm going to find that kind of fish? "

" I don't know. You must know somewhere. You're supposed to be the fishman. Couldn't you find a—what was it—jewfish? "

I stared at him. As a matter of fact I did know where I could

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find a jewfish. I knew where there was a jewfish as big as an ox. They don't move around much and this one lived in the hull of a sunken dhow about a mile up-coast. But working as I do without a boat, you don't shoot that kind of fish, not unless you want to be towed straight down to the bottom or swallowed alive.

"We could stage it properly," Billy said. "Get everybody down to the beach, and you could go in with your harpoon, stick it in the thing, and we could haul it up. Everyone would be happy and you'd be a hero."

"What would happen when they cut it open and found there were no human remains inside?"

Billy looked blank for a moment. "We would have to rush it away quick. It could be worked."

We had reached my hut. He followed me in, pleading. He used every argument he knew. I did a few jobs around the shack while he was talking. I could have the hotel motor boat, if I wanted it, and any of his staff.

While I was working, I was thinking about the jewfish. I had wanted to get him for months. He was about six feet long. Not much under three hundred pounds. If I'd been able to afford a boat I'd have had a stab at him long ago. This offer of a motor launch seemed too good to miss.

I let Billy talk me into it. I put up a feeble resistance for half an hour. Then I gave in.

It was midday when we sighted the wreck. She lay about two hundred yards offshore, with her mast just breaking the waves. The whole scene looked kind of ominous. The sea had the texture of molten metal, and the noon sun lit up the atmosphere like a white-hot blanket.

I had three natives with me—the changing-room attendant, who was an old man, very frail-looking in his white singlet and sarong, and two boatmen. The boatmen were boys. They looked as if they could just about whip cream with an outboard motor. It was a great little set-up.

I checked the harpoon head to make sure it came off the shaft easily; tied the two-hundred-foot line to the metal frame of one of the seats. I told the boys to cut the motor and drift in. Big fish get kind of drowsy around midday and I thought maybe if we were quiet enough I might catch him taking a nap outside his lair.

I got a cushion off one of the seats and told the boys they were to keep it under the line all the time to stop it from chafing on the gunwale. I arranged about signals. Their eyes were big and scared-looking. The old man kept taking snuff and sneezing nervously. It could have been funny, but it wasn't.

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Fifty feet from the wreck I went over the side. I ducked my head under. The water seemed to have cleared a little, but I still couldn't see bottom. I knew the country pretty well, though. It was no deeper than the bay—all big boulders. Real grouper country. I headed towards the mast with my heels well down, so they wouldn't splash.

When I got to the mast I stopped. The wreck was below me, but I still couldn't see it, not the faintest shadow of it. I had left the schnorkel behind so I shouldn't make a noise blowing through it. I lay in the water holding my breath and looking down and listening. Not a sound.

I gulped in some air and went down, careful not to touch the mast or set up the least vibration. The stoved-in deck of the dhow loomed slowly up towards me. I hooked one finger under the coral-encrusted gunwale and hung there, looking in every direction. There was a greenish tinge to the water—a sort of jungle twilight.

The timbers of the boat were half rotted, and pen coral was forming like clusters of undeveloped grapes along their broken edges. A host of tiny red-striped chætodons glided about my head, stiff as chips of painted wood.

I was strung up tight to resist the shock of seeing the gigantic proportions, the deep belly, and yard-wide mouth of the fish I was after. With the magnification, he would look not much smaller than an elephant.

I peered carefully at every half-discerned shape; then I eased myself gently away from the side of the boat and looked down at the hole in her bows. This was his lair.

There was no sign of him.

I surfaced slowly, took in some more air, and went down again. Very carefully I circled the wreck. I did it in about six breathing stages, covering only a few yards each time. I knew that a green jewfish the size of this one would probably come straight at me in a headlong rush, with no warning but the water gurgling in the back of its cavernous throat.

I worked my way round to the bows again. Nothing. Either the creature was inside its den or it was away foraging in deep water. There was only one way to find out which.

Taking in as much air as I could cram into my lungs, my throat, and my cheeks, I sounded bottom and picked up a small rock. Then, with the rock holding me down, I half walked, half floated to the hole in the bows. I stood square in front of it with the harpoon couched to withstand a rush.

I waited a few moments. Nothing happened.

I shifted the harpoon and thumped the wood hull with it;

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quickly levelled it again. The sound beat through the water like gunfire.

I edged a bit nearer, trying to pierce the darkness. I could see nothing. I listened to the water with every inch of my skin in an effort to discern the presence of a great body.

I felt something. There was suddenly a terrible sense of nearness. It was like a shadow moving up over me. The water stirred, whispered against me. The skin crawled on the nape of my neck. My chest filled with almost uncontrollable panic. I dropped the rock and twisted round.

I thought at first it was the hull of a boat. It was so close it seemed to fill the entire sea. I didn't know what it was. Even as I turned, the whole thing seemed to open up, become a yawning chasm. I felt myself drawn towards it like a bit of fluff into a vacuum cleaner. I struggled to get the spear round. I could never have done it, but the suction twisted me. The harpoon cut round, straight into the gaping mouth, tore on in and in, lodged with a jerk that brought me up short, jammed against the bony bottom jaw, my hand actually inside the mouth.

Before I could recover, a regurgitating blast hit me full in the face, knocking me backwards half a dozen feet. The water around me seemed to shake. I scrambled upwards blindly towards the surface, burst up above the sea, gesticulating to the boatmen.

They started to haul on the line. I splash-crawled back to the motor boat, expecting the most tremendous convulsions; scrambled aboard. I seized the line and threw my weight back on it; fell over. There was hardly any resistance. The harpoon must have come out.

I got up, cursing. The brute must have spat the spear out as a river fish spits out bait. I threw my mask off; beat my fists on the gunwale.

The boys took in the rest of the line. Suddenly there was a shout. I started up. A great shape had heaved up alongside. It was the jewfish. And it was dead.

It was over on its side, the spear still protruding from its gaping mouth. When we had stopped rocking the motor boat and shouting up at the sky, I got the boat-hook and turned the brute over. I saw then what had happened. The tip of the harpoon had gone through the throat and out of the top of its back, pushing the scaly skin up like a tent at the base of the dorsal. It had virtually stabbed itself to death with its own suction. The spear had severed its spine.

Even seen without magnification, it was a monster. Between six and seven feet. Over three hundred pounds, I judged—thick-lipped and hunchbacked and gross.

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We ran a rope through its gills and secured it alongside where I could protect it with the boat-hook in case of shark. We chugged slowly back to the hotel. On the way we each took some of the old man's snuff. There was laughing and sneezing and I told them how it had happened. I just had to blab to someone. My pulse was doing about ninety-eight.

Round the point from the hotel we stopped and I went over the side with the rope tied to my belt. The boys took the boat back to the boat-house, while I towed the big fish round to the bay. It was heavy going and it gave me a funny feeling each time I looked back into that great open mouth. It was like towing a railway tunnel.

When I reached the bay I got astride the thing, gripping its scaly barrel with my knees to keep it out of sight under the water. But it was lunch-time in the hotel and there was no one on the beach, which was just as well as it took me three dives to get the clumsy thing down to the bottom and wedge the knotted end of the rope under a rock.

I waded ashore guiltily. For the first time I began to realize what an underhand trick we were trying to bring off. If it hadn't been for the girl getting killed that morning it might have been quite a good stunt; but that took the kick out of it somehow.

I went back to my shack and changed. Then I trudged up to the hotel and asked at the desk for Billy Beechum. The page-boy went off to fetch him. In less than a minute Billy came hurrying along, dabbing his mouth with a napkin and swallowing down a mouthful of food.

He chivvied me away from the desk and along a passage. "Well, did you get it?" he whispered, breathing curry all over me.

"Yep."

"Good man! I knew you would. Splendid. Come and have something to eat."

"Not in this ritzy joint."

"You could eat in my office. Was it a big one?"

"Big enough."

"Well, have a drink."

"I don't drink."

"Nor you do." He looked at me. "What's the matter?"

"Nothing." I hesitated. "You're perfectly happy about all this?"

Billy pinched his nose and regarded me over the top of his glasses. "Yes. Why?"

"Nothing," I said. Billy was a good chap. I supposed I must be getting fussy.

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"I'll lay everything on for three o'clock then," he said.

"I suppose you must."

I left him staring after me thoughtfully. It was my fault, I thought, pushing a hole through the heat of the garden. I just should never have got up that morning in the first place.

At three o'clock I rolled up out of a cat-nap and collected my equipment. I stepped out of the hut; stopped in astonishment.

The hotel beach was packed with people. They were sitting on the rocks and along the rail outside the changing-rooms. The diving-tower looked like a small grandstand.

This was taking things a bit too far, I thought. Stepping out onto the sand, I felt like a first-night ballerina leaving her dressing-room. The nearer I got to the crowd the worse the feeling got. Group by group, every eye turned in my direction. I went hot and cold all over. My walk seemed to go haywire. How the hell was I going to make a fight with a dead fish look convincing before so many people?

Billy came hurrying to meet me.

"You idiot!" I said when he got close enough.

He showed his teeth. "Make it good!" he muttered.

Then, taking my arm, Billy led me along in front of the onlookers, and fussed around me trying to help me on with my fins and mask.

I tried not to look at all the people, but I couldn't help it. They were everywhere I turned my eyes. They had on serious expressions, most of them, but one or two of the kids looked as if they were looking forward to seeing me get eaten.

I walked with the shark line towards the palm tree; but Billy stopped me. He had brought three natives down with him to take care of that. I guessed they were all part of the act. Maybe he had briefed them, I don't know; but they were big, muscular fellows and they looked better than the palm tree.

When I was ready I started to go in, but the crowd hadn't done with me yet. They clapped. I pulled the mask down over my face and plunged into the sea quickly, before someone started throwing me flowers.

I beat out into the bay, as if looking for something. When I had got over the shelf I made half a dozen token dives. I filled my lungs to capacity each time, went down about ten feet, and hooked my fingers under the rock. This way I managed to make each dive last about three minutes. That should impress them, I thought.

The water was murky, and I kept an all-round look-out just in case. There wasn't much to see, though—a few grunts, a pair of cuttlefish frilling along like tiny, padded bedroom stools.

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I worked along to where I judged I had moored the jewfish and went down all the way to the bottom.

Once again the oppressive gloom. I finned along just above the rock, bracing myself again to take the shock of seeing the huge shape loom up through the water. First time I missed it. I tried again. I worked backwards and forwards. I still couldn't see it.

A nasty little seed of panic split open inside me then, and began to grow. Maybe I hadn't moored it securely enough. I began quickening my beat. I was certain this was the spot. Yes, there was the rock. With the last of my air I swam to it.

The jewfish had gone! This was the rock and it had gone.

I felt down under the rock. The rope was still there. It lay snaked along the bottom. I found the end of it. All that remained of the jewfish was one big gill-plate and half a jawbone.

I kicked to the surface. What the hell was I going to do now? Either the creature had come alive and torn itself free, wrenching half its head off to do it, or something had come along and chewed it up. How was I going to explain that to Billy? to all those people? Desperately I went down again. Maybe the thing had come adrift somehow and was just floating around.

I went about two yards and stopped. There was something in the murk ahead of me that looked like the flange of a huge anchor. I looked all round; couldn't see anything. Edged forward. Something inside me was screaming *stop*, but I was too upset to listen. I had drifted right up against the "anchor" before I realized what it was. Everything inside me seemed to seize up. The back of my neck contracted like a slug with salt on it.

Very, very gently I let the air in me take me to the surface. I lay there gasping. I wanted to yell out; tell everyone what I had seen. It had been a huge tail-fin.

I looked round at the people. Every eye was on me. They were like a fight crowd, hungry for something to happen.

I shook out the line in the water, checked the harpoon. Then I dived. The creature was lying along the bottom. It stretched away into the gloom like a torpedo. If I had been swimming in nitro-glycerine I wouldn't have moved more delicately. Along and above the grey back I finned, above the big triangular dorsal, which leaned over to one side a little, lazily. Just behind the head I stopped.

It was a hammerhead shark.

The grotesque skull, shaped like a mallet, was three feet across. The tiny eyes, set in what would have been the striking ends of the mallet, were invisible to me. It was sleeping, which was hardly surprising if it had eaten the jewfish.

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Its skull was virtually impenetrable. There was only one place where I stood even a chance of killing it. I scooped myself down silently till I was directly behind its head, raised the harpoon, and plunged it with all my strength into the back of its neck.

The whole water seemed to explode. I let everything go and beat away to the surface. Spitting out the schnorkel, I yelled to the natives to pull on the line. I started to race for the beach.

The three natives had begun hauling in the slack, but almost instantly the line sprang up white and taut out of the water. The next moment the Sinhalese were flat on their faces, being dragged down the sand. They splashed about in the surf, trying to brace themselves, but it was no good. First one let go; then all three.

The line whipped along past me. I grabbed at it. For an instant my hands seemed to be on fire; then I was moving through the bay at a great rate. My mask was dragged off. The water punched into my eyes, my mouth, blinding and choking me. I craned my neck and managed to snatch a look.

There was no sign of the shark, but the line was dragging me straight out to sea. The creature must have turned then, because I found myself slewing sideways through the water. The diving-tower loomed up over me. I thought I was going to hit it, but somehow I swung round inshore of its wooden piles.

With sudden, desperate inspiration I kicked right on round the nearest pile and braced my feet against it, hauling on the rope.

The line tautened. Suddenly there was a crash. The pile broke. The rope leapt from my hands. People started dropping into the sea around me, screaming. Timber was falling. A great jagged flame leapt up behind my eyes and I went out cold.

I came to with the idea at the back of my mind that I was in hell. The whole of my body felt as if it was on fire. Then I opened my eyes and saw that I was lying stretched out on hot paving-stones, and someone seemed to be kneeling on my back.

Whoever it was was wringing me out like a wet dish-rag. When he had finished I was helped up and people started congratulating me and shaking me by the hand. Then somehow Billy was there. He clapped me on the back and kept saying, "Marvellous! Wonderful!" But behind his glasses his eyes were mystified. He couldn't make out what had happened.

"Sorry I couldn't hold him," I croaked.

For a moment he looked more mystified than ever. Then he grinned. He raised his finger. "Hear that?" he said.

Above the noise of the crowd came the sound of "Jumbari-wallah!" In Ceylon, whenever natives haul on a rope, you hear their song, "Jumbari-wallah!" I pushed my way to the rail. It

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was coming from the beach. Incredulously, I saw twenty or thirty natives throwing themselves back on a rope in unison. "Jumbari-wallah!" Slowly the great body of the hammerhead was coming up through the surf. "Jumbari-wallah!"

"That last jerk did it," Billy said. "It must have levered your harpoon up into its brain."

That night I put on my suit. There was a big celebration up in the hotel and I was guest of honour. I sat at Billy's table and we had twenty-seven different dishes of hors d'œuvre, oysters, followed by kingfish au gratin and duck. It was a hell of a meal and everyone got roaring drunk and, I guess, that's about all.

There was just one thing, though. Towards the end of the evening the girl who had caused all the trouble turned up. She was accompanied by a guy whom nobody in general and her aunt in particular didn't much like. He had a car and they had been up to Kandy in it. She had ducked out of the bay and gone off with him when her aunt wasn't looking.

Things broke up a little after that. The aunt had the screaming jeebies in the foyer. There was a grimly silent slugging match outside between the young man and another young man.

Me, I had a headache. As quietly as possible I left. I was halfway across the lawn when Billy caught me up. He fell into step beside me. We walked back towards my place in silence.

"Hell," Billy said at last. "Even if it didn't work out quite right, you put up a darn good show. That squares us, Mike, you know."

I didn't say anything.

"Just thought you might like to know—you being a drifter and all that."

"What has that got to do with it?"

"Mike, old Mike," Billy said. "Do you think I don't know what's been keeping you here? Well, the debt's settled. You can go ahead and drift."

I stared at him. How had he known something I hadn't known myself? But he was right. I took a deep breath. The monsoons were coming. Their salty foretaste feathered the air. Maybe after all I would hitch across to Trincomalee. It was summer there now and the reefs would be ablaze with fish. It made me feel better just thinking about it.

Billy was watching me. "Wish I could come along," he said.

★ ★ ★

When you have finished reading this copy of ARGOSY, why not pass it on to a member of H.M. Forces?

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THE TENDER AGE

Wasn't it odd
that he found them so delicious?

BY JOHN COLLIER

HOW pleasant to have travelled the world as you have, Mr. Renvil! Six months here, a year there—always moving on! We parsons are tied to our parishes like watchdogs to their kennels, barking once a week, as best we can, to keep away the Eternal Prowler.—Well, Mr. Dodd, I should not mind being tied to such a spot as this. I should like it very much; one gets weary of wandering. I am hoping to be able to stay here permanently; I hope it will turn out that way.

Go back to your chair, Patricia. Mr. Renvil did not come here to be bothered by little girls. He came here to have tea with your father and me.—Oh please, Mummy, let me sit with Mr. Renvil.

Pattikins, you heard your mother; sit in your place and show how well-behaved you can be.

Oh, but please, Mr. Dodd, don't disturb your little daughter on my account.

Her mother likes her to obey; I am perhaps a little lax in that respect. Let me see—what were we saying? Oh, you really think of staying here for good? That will be very nice for us, I'm sure. It's a lonely part of the country. There are very few people of our sort; very few farmers; very few cottagers, even.

It will be very nice for me, Mr. Dodd, if I am able to stay. I have long wanted to make my home somewhere, but something has always come over me, call it a sudden urge if you like, and in a moment my plans are changed and I am off.

Moving on! Moving on! Well, you have certainly seen the world, no doubt about that! All sorts of places, all sorts of people! When you were in tropical parts, I suppose you saw savages; they have always interested me. Even cannibals perhaps?—Savages, yes indeed. Savages one sees everywhere, and not only in the tropics. As to the cannibals and cannibalism, I can't pretend to be an authority on that sort of thing. But I have had enough of the tropics, and of foreign countries altogether. The English countryside is unbeatable. Your hills and

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woods here are the very best of it. A garden like this is my idea of heaven. It is here I should like to stay.

Patty, I have told you once, you must not climb on Mr. Renvil. Mr. Renvil did not come here to be climbed and clambered upon. How do you know Mr. Renvil likes little girls? Not everyone likes them, especially when they are ill-behaved.

Oh, but I do, Mrs. Dodd. I'm sure no one likes little girls better than I do. I think they are absolutely delicious, absolutely delightful.

I think, Mary, you are making too much fuss. Our guest has told us he has no objection. Let us do him the courtesy of taking his word for it. Patty has taken a great fancy to you, Mr. Renvil. She is not often so eager to sit on anyone's knee.—It seems to me, George, you are putting Mr. Renvil quite on the spot, as they say. Do you expect him to come out with it to your face that he finds the child a nuisance? I'm sure he is too polite for that.

I might be, Mrs. Dodd, if it were necessary, but in this case it is not. I think little girls are delectable creatures, especially when they are six or seven.

Now, Mr. Renvil, we are blunt people hereabouts. Brutally frank, as some might put it. And I couldn't help noticing last time you came to see us—or was it the first time, after you met my husband on the road? I think it must have been the first time; I don't think Patty was home last Tuesday. Well, whenever it was, she had already begun to clamber upon you, and it seemed to me you were anxious to be rid of her. When she came climbing and squeezing and nuzzling, I'm sure I saw you flinch away. I felt you were quite flustered and upset.

My dear, I really believe you are imagining things and perhaps embarrassing our visitor. If Mr. Renvil feels anything of that sort I'm sure he will be candid enough to say so, and Patty can go and play with her toys.—Yes, dear, but some people hesitate to say they dislike children; it is so often said to be the sign of a bad heart.

I'm sure Mr. Renvil is above such a vulgar prejudice, and I hope he will give us credit for being above it ourselves. Novelists and the people who write for the cinema find it easy to identify the villain of the piece by giving him an aversion to children and animals. They have him kick a dog or slap a child, and this in turn strengthens the popular misconception. There was some sort of writer once staying in the village, Mr. Renvil, and he explained it all to us. It was most interesting. Children, dogs, and, I think, cats.

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Not so much cats, dear, because so many people have rather a horror of them. Lord Nelson did, for one, and all sorts of famous people. Dr. Johnson, though, loved his cat.

Dr. Johnson was a great friend of the Church, and now you tell me he was a cat-lover. Perhaps I should be grateful on the first count, but I have never much liked the worthy Doctor, and I shall not change my opinion because of his fondness for cats. I hope you are not a great admirer, Mr. Renvil. I hope you don't think me guilty of lese-majesty.

Oh no, Mr. Dodd, not in the least, I assure you. I myself could never feel very warmly about Dr. Johnson. A tremendous mind, no doubt, but he is not one of those great figures I could imagine myself meeting and liking if we were contemporaries. I was greatly put off when first I read of his eating habits. When I think of a man gorging and gulping like some ravenous cannibal, some ravenous animal, with his face bent over almost into his food, and the veins swelling out on his forehead, it makes me positively shudder, as if someone were walking over my grave. Excuse me, Mrs. Dodd, if my description is unpleasantly vivid. I am quoting almost exactly what I read.

Oh, I don't shudder so easily, Mr. Renvil. I am not one of your sensitive persons; I am thick-skinned. I am the practical, down-to-earth member of the family. But tell me frankly, and once and for all—are not sticky little fingers, and huggings and nuzzlings rather unpleasant to you? Because I really thought I saw you shudder, just as you describe, the first time Patty came climbing on your knee.

Well, I am not a family man; I am unmarried, as you know. That may make me a little awkward. But as it happens, I have the very greatest fondness for little girls. Little girls of six or seven—to me at that stage they are just at perfection. They are formed already, and still so fresh and tender, and they have such charming ways. They have not yet reached the lanky stage or the scrawny stage. They positively melt in one's heart.

And little boys? Do you like little boys equally? We put Patty first, of course, but we have often wished she had a little brother.—I like little boys, Mrs. Dodd, but they are so very tough in these days, with all the comic strips and the cowboy pictures. A little girl like this one on my knee—I don't think I could ask for more than just such a little girl.

Well, Patty, it seems that Mr. Renvil does not mind you too much. So I suppose you may stay where you are until he puts you down.—I know Mr. Renvil likes me, Mummy. I knew it all the time. The very first day he came to tea he whispered in my ear. He whispered he could eat me up.

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I think I know what misled you, Mrs. Dodd. I have some sort of little nervous twitch every now and then. I sometimes give a little start and shudder.

Why yes, I just noticed. I think no one would notice unless they were watching as I was—watching, I mean, to see if Patty was bothering you. I think highly-strung people, people of talent, often have a little nothing of that sort. Like Lord Nelson and his aversion to cats. Mr. Dodd has a cousin who is extremely gifted musically; it is thought he could have played at concerts had he really taken it up. He sometimes starts almost out of his chair.

Do you like pussy cats, Mr. Renvil? Would you rather have a little girl or a pussy cat?

Oh, a little girl, Patricia. I don't like cats at all.

Would you rather have a little girl than a bunny rabbit?

Why, yes indeed. Rabbit is quite nice, but I would rather have a little girl.

There used to be lots of bunny rabbits but they all died because of a disease. I think there is one who lives in the big wood on the top of the hill, but Daddy won't take me there.

Now, Patty, you are always whining and wheedling to go to the wood. Daddy has the parish to look after, and Daddy has his sermon to write, and he has told you there are no rabbits there.

Shall you keep the house you are living in at present if you decide to stay, Mr. Renvil?—I hardly think so. I shall probably look around for something a little larger. One never knows, of course; one's plans may change at a moment's notice. But I do sincerely hope that nothing will prevent my settling here.

No more sudden urges, eh? Well, we shall be glad if you can avoid them. The wanderlust, I suppose you would call it? A hunger to be moving on, moving on.

I suppose so, Mr. Dodd. It's a matter of fate, I suppose. I think you might describe it as a sort of hunger.

Mr. Renvil, if you had a little girl would you take her to the wood?—Yes, my dear, I very well might. I am not clever enough to write sermons, so I have more time than your father. It would be very nice to take a little girl to the wood.

Ah, the Church clock, striking six! The sunset gun I think they call it in India or somewhere. We have finished tea long ago. Can I persuade you to take a glass of sherry, Mr. Renvil? An aperitif, as they say in France?—No, thank you, Mrs. Dodd; I have no need of it. It is high time I was on my way. I am walking this evening, and if I am not home by seven I shall hear murmuring in the kitchen, quite loud, and very gloomy in tone. I am most grateful for your kindness, Mr. Dodd. Thank you

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both so much. And I will try, indeed I will, to control any sudden urge. Patricia, may I kiss you good-bye?

Mummy, can I walk up the road with Mr. Renvil? Can I walk with him as far as the wood? I could just peep inside and see a great big bunny rabbit.—Now, Patty, Patty, Pattikins! I think Mr. Renvil has been more than nice to you already. It is time to stop asking things and bothering him.

It would be a pleasure to me, Mrs. Dodd. You have no idea what a pleasure it would be to me. But it must be at least half a mile to where the woods begin, and half a mile back again. I'm sure those plump little legs would not carry her more than half as far. And I could hardly see you walking back all alone, my dear.—Oh yes, I could, Mr. Renvil. I go all by myself to the village, and that is farther than the wood. I walk there and back all by myself. Don't I, Daddy? Don't I, Mummy? Please, Mr. Renvil, ask Mummy to let me go with you to the wood!

Now, Patty, that is whining and wheedling and nuzzling-up all in one. Mr. Renvil doesn't know what to do with little girls who cling. You are strangling him; you are taking his breath away. Mr. Renvil can hardly breathe.—Mary, my dear, I think we are having altogether too much fuss over Patty this evening. The child can walk back by herself; Mr. Renvil has said she will be no trouble to him. It is daylight still, we have no bandits or wolves in this part of the world. She can be back in half an hour or so, in ample time for her supper. She will be off your hands when you are busy, just when she is most trouble to you.

Well, very well, if you really don't mind, Mr. Renvil. All I hope is that Patty is not too much for you. Don't let her give you one of your sudden urges, just as we are hoping you will settle here.—Oh, as to that, Mrs. Dodd, it is a matter of fate, a matter of fate. No man can avoid his destiny.

Come, my little dear, we will walk together to the wood, and if there is time enough we will take a tiny peep inside it.—Can we really, Mr. Renvil? We'll see a great big rabbit. Good-bye, Mummy! Good-bye, Daddy!

Good-bye, Patty! Good-bye, Pattikins! Good-bye, Mr. Renvil!

★ ★ ★

THE TOUCAN

The toucan's profile is prognathous,
Its person is a thing of bathos.
If even I can tell a toucan
I'm reasonably sure that you can.

OGDEN NASH

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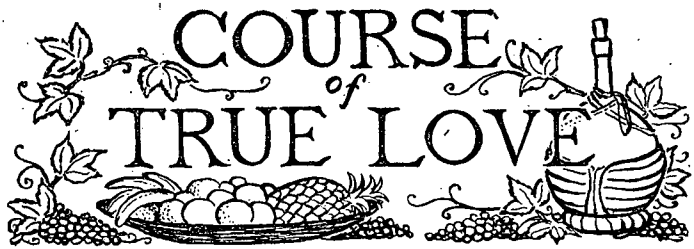

Every man gets a little, but no man gets a full meal

SAMUEL JOHNSON

When she carries food to the table and stoops down
—Doing this out of love—and lays soup with its good
Tickling smell, or fry winking from the fire
And I look up, perhaps from a book I am reading
Or other work: there is an importance of beauty
Which can't be accounted for by there and then,
And attacks me, but not separately from the welcome
Of the food, or the grace of her arms.

BERNARD SPENCER,
Part of Plenty

En Cocotte

She would spend £500 on a dinner for twenty men, and sometimes, the chroniclers say, offer herself as the plat du jour, naked, on a silver platter in a large pie.

Many gourmets claim to have encountered this unusual dish. The Marquis de Vellavieja described it to his cousin the Baroness de Stoeckel, wife of a Russian Minister to Washington. He was dining chez Cora, when—*The door flew open and four footmen in her livery brought in a life-size dish with a cover. They placed this in the middle of the long table and on taking off the cover there lay Cora Pearl nude . . . She had such a wonderful figure . . . that all the guests gasped with admiration.*

Gastronomic Footnote:

The story of the eminent courtesan being dished up au naturel is as persistent as the story of the Indian Rope Trick . . . The American cotton king McFadden is reported to have ordered a similar bonne bouche at Maxim's, with the refinement of having

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the naked girl served in a delicate pink sauce. It would be interesting to know how many restaurants in the nineteenth century were equipped with the silverware necessary for this service.

CYRIL PEARL, *The Girl with the Swansdown Seat*

Food of Love

They could not sit at meals but feel how well
It soothèd each to be the other by.

JOHN KEATS, *Isabella*

Honey-Pie

Amongst the Arusi-Galla, who inhabit a region some seventy-five miles south of Addis Ababa, only marriages between members of different tribes are allowed. The bridegroom begins the wedding ceremony by sitting on the bride's lap. He lays his head against hers while a thick paste made of butter, honey, and *tej* is poured over the heads of both. They catch the delectable mess in their hands and eagerly lap it up. The bride is then completely wrapped up in a cotton cloth and is laid, like a white bundle, in front of the saddle on a horse ridden by a friend of the bridegroom. He gallops to the bride's village and lays the bundle on the lap of the bride's mother.

PAUL HARTLMAIER, *Golden Lion*

Repast—and Present

After you've dined to your heart's content,
And I've glanced at the check by my plate,
Don't worry, my dear, if I seem to look queer,
It's merely something you ate.

STEPHEN SCHLITZER

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For Afters

After a minute in there, a girl with high pink complexion, in a lemon-yellow hat, pulled out the other chair at Karen's table and bumped down on to it. Several other tables were still empty and Karen glanced at them pointedly: she did not want company. But Yellow Hat's face swooped across at her confidentially: "D'you mind if I come?" she said. "There's a fellow after me." Her round slate-blue eyes rolled in a woman-to-woman way.

"Do," said Karen with a polite smile.

Yellow Hat, who was large, billowed out pleated jabots between the lapels of her opulent fur coat. She had a highly respectable kind of flashiness, and was not what Mrs. Michaelis would have called quite-quite. Karen had seen her being seen off noisily by a number of friends. Whoever the fellow was, he must be exceedingly bold.

ELIZABETH BOWEN, *The House in Paris*

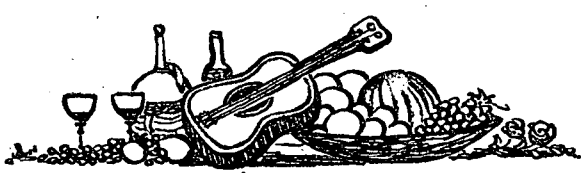
Al Fresco

Below Hymettos on a quay of marble
By a brown thatch of withered myrtle shaded,
With love between them, wine upon the table,
After a time a sort of sorrow brooded.

Each wavelet hinted lazily of trouble,
Red fish, like omens, in the green sea glided,
A girl sang in a clear but fatal treble,
A child laughed, and a laughing echo faded.

A chill fell in the noon-glare, nothing,
Not the warm handclasp nor the laboured breathing
Of perfect passion, no impetuous kissing,
Could strengthen hope or make a curse a blessing,
For they were envied by the gods of Greece
For being at once in heaven and at peace.

WILLIAM PLOMER, *Two Sonnets*



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SUMMER IN THE AIR

There's magic in a new pair of shoes

BY RAY BRADBURY

LATE at night, going home from the show with his mother and father, Tom saw the tennis shoes in the bright store window. He glanced quickly away, but his ankles were seized and his feet were suspended. The earth spun, the shop awnings slammed their canvas wings overhead with the thrust of his body running.

His mother and father walked quietly on either side of him. Tom walked backwards, watching the tennis shoes in the midnight window left behind.

"It was a nice film," said Mother.

Tom murmured, "It was."

It was June and long past time for buying the special shoes that were quiet as a summer rain falling on the walks. June and the earth full of lightning, and everything everywhere in motion. Grass poured in from the country, surrounded the pavements, stranded the houses; the green flood was endless. Any moment the town would capsize and go down, and leave not so much as a stir in the clover and weeds. And here Tom stood, trapped on the dead concrete and the red-brick streets, unable to move.

"Dad!" He blurted it out. "Back there in that window, those Cream-Sponge Para Lightfoot Shoes."

His father didn't even turn. "Suppose you tell me why you need a new pair of tennis shoes; can you do that?"

"Well—"

It was because they felt the way it feels every summer when you take off your shoes for the first time and run in the grass. They felt as it feels sticking your feet out of the hot covers in wintertime to let the cold wind from the open window blow on them suddenly, and you let them stay out a long time until you pull them back in under the covers again to feel them, like packed snow. The tennis shoes felt as it always feels the first time every year wading in the slow waters of the creek and seeing

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your feet below, half an inch farther downstream, with refraction, than the real part of you above water.

"Dad," said Tom, "it's hard to explain."

Somehow the people who made tennis shoes knew what boys needed and wanted. They put marshmallows and coiled springs in the soles, and they wove the rest out of bleached grasses from other summers that had fire in them from the wilderness. Somewhere deep in the soft loam of the shoes the thin hard sinews of the buck deer were hidden. The people that made the shoes must have watched a lot of winds blow the trees and a lot of rivers going down to the lakes. Whatever it was, it was in the shoes, and it was summer.

Tom tried to get all this in words.

"Yes," said Father, "but what's wrong with last year's pair? Why can't you dig them out of the cupboard?"

Well, he felt sorry for boys who lived in California where they wore tennis shoes all year and never knew what it was to get winter off their feet, peel off the iron leather shoes all full of snow and rain, and run barefoot for a day and then lace on the first new tennis shoes of the season, which was better than barefoot.

The magic was always in the new pair of shoes. The magic might die by the first of September, but now, in late June, there was still plenty of magic, and shoes like these could jump you over trees and rivers and houses. And if you wanted, they could jump you over fences and pavements and dogs.

"Don't you see?" said Tom. "I just can't use last year's pair."

For last year's pair were dead inside. They had been fine when he started them out, last year. But by the end of summer, every year, you always found out, you always knew, you couldn't really jump over rivers and trees and houses in them, and they were dead. But this was a new year, a new season. And you always felt that this year, with this new pair of shoes, you could do anything, anything at all.

They walked up the steps to their house silently. Inside, Dad shut the door. "Save your money," he said. "In four or five weeks—"

"Summer'll be over!"

Upstairs, lights out, Tom lay in his bed, looking at his feet with the heavy iron shoes off, with the big chunks of winter fallen away from them. The feet were far away down there at the end of the bed, expressionless in the moonlight.

"Reasons," said Tom, half aloud, "we've got to think of reasons for the shoes!"

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Well, the hills around town were full of friends making cows run riot, playing barometer to the season's changes, catching the sun, peeling like calendars each day to take more sun. To catch those friends, you must run much faster than foxes or squirrels.

As for the town, it steamed with enemies grown so irritable with heat they had fallen to remembering all winter's minor insults and rages. *Catch friends, ditch enemies*—that was the Cream-Sponge Para Lightfoot motto. He meant to live by it!

He shook his money-box in his hand, feeling how little it weighed, shifting its bulk inside.

Whatever you want, Tom thought, you've got to make your own way. During the night now, let's find that path through the forest.

Downtown, the store lights went out, one by one. A wind blew in the window. It was like a river going downstream and his feet wanting to go with it. In his dreams he heard a rabbit running, running, running in the deep warm grass.

Old Mr. Sanderson moved through his shoe store as the proprietor of a pet shop must move each morning among the kennelled animals from everywhere in the world, touching each one briefly along the way. Mr. Sanderson brushed his hands over the shoes in the window, and some of them were like cats to him and some were like dogs; he touched each pair with concern, adjusting laces, fixing tongues.

There was a sound of growing thunder.

One moment, the door to Sanderson's Shoe Emporium was empty. The next, Tom Williams stood clumsily there, staring down at his leather shoes as if these heavy things could not be pulled up from the pavement. The thunder had stopped when his shoes stopped. Now, with painful slowness, daring to look only at the money in his cupped hand, Tom moved out of the bright sunlight of Saturday noon. He made careful stacks of nickels, dimes, and quarters on the counter.

"Don't say a word!" said Mr. Sanderson.

Tom froze.

"First, I know just what you want to buy," said Mr. Sanderson. "Second, I see you every afternoon at my window; you think I don't see, you're wrong. Third, to give it its full name, you want the Royal Crown Cream-Sponge Para Lightfoot Tennis Shoes: 'Like Menthol on your Feet!' Fourth, you want credit."

"No!" cried Tom, breathing hard, as if he'd run all night in his dreams. "I've got something better than credit to offer!" He gasped. "Before I tell, Mr. Sanderson, you got to do me one

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small favour. Can you remember when was the last time you yourself wore a pair of Lightfoot shoes, sir?"

Mr. Sanderson's face darkened. "Oh, ten, twenty, say, thirty years ago. Why?"

"Mr. Sanderson, don't you think you owe it to your customers, sir, at least to try the tennis shoes you sell, for just one minute, so you know how they feel? People forget if they don't keep testing things. A cigar-store man smokes cigars, don't he? Liquor-store man samples his own wine, I should think. So—"

"You may have noticed," said the old man, "I'm wearing shoes."

"But tennis shoes, sir! How're you going to sell tennis shoes unless you can rave about them, and how're you going to rave about them unless you know them?"

Mr. Sanderson backed off a little distance from the boy's fever, one hand to his chin. "Well . . ."

"Mr. Sanderson," said Tom, "you sell me something and I'll sell you something just as valuable."

"Is it absolutely imperative to the sale that I put on a pair of the tennis shoes, boy?"

"I do wish you would, sir!"

The old man sighed. A minute later, seated, panting quietly, he laced the tennis shoes to his long narrow feet. They looked detached and alien down there next to the dark turn-ups of his business suit.

Mr. Sanderson stood up.

"How do they feel?" asked the boy.

"How do they feel, he asks; they feel fine." The old man started to sit down.

"Please!" Tom held out his hand. "Mr. Sanderson, now. Could you kind of rock back and forth a little, sponge around, bounce, kind of, while I tell you the rest? It's this: I give you my money, you give me the shoes, I owe you a dollar. But, Mr. Sanderson, but—soon as I get those shoes on, you know what happens?"

"What?"

"Bang! I deliver your packages, pick up packages, bring you coffee, burn your rubbish, run to the post office, telegraph office, library! You'll see twelve of me in and out, in and out, every minute. Feel those shoes, Mr. Sanderson; feel how fast they'd take me? All those springs inside? Feel all the running inside? Feel how they kind of grab hold and can't let you alone and don't like you just standing there? Feel how quick I'd be doing the things you'd rather not bother with? You stay in the nice cool store while I'm jumping all around town! But it's not

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me, really; it's the shoes. They're going like mad down alleys, cutting corners, and back! There they go!"

Mr. Sanderson stood amazed with the rush of words. When the words got going, the flow carried him, he began to sink deep in the shoes, to flex his toes, limber his arches, test his ankles. He rocked softly, secretly, back and forth, in a small breeze from the open door. The tennis shoes silently hushed themselves deep in the carpet, sank as in jungle grass, in loam and resilient clay. He gave one solemn bounce of his heels in the yeasty dough, in the yielding and welcoming earth.

Emotions hurried over his face as if many coloured lights had been switched on and off. His mouth hung slightly open. Slowly, he gentled and rocked himself to a halt, and the boy's voice faded, and they stood there looking at each other in a tremendous and natural silence.

"Boy," said the old man at last, "in five years, how would you like a job selling shoes in this emporium?"

"Gosh, thanks, Mr. Sanderson, but I don't know what I'm going to be yet."

"Anything you want to be, son," said the old man, "you'll be. No one will ever stop you."

The old man walked lightly across the store to the wall of ten thousand boxes, came back with some shoes for the boy, and wrote up a list on some paper while the boy was lacing the shoes on his feet and then stood there, waiting.

The old man held out the list. "A dozen things you got to do for me this afternoon. Finish them, we're even Stephen, and you're fired."

"Thanks, Mr. Sanderson!" Tom bounded away.

"Stop!" cried the old man.

Tom pulled up and turned.

Mr. Sanderson leaned forward. "How do they feel?"

The boy looked down at his feet deep in the rivers, in the fields of wheat, in the wind that already was rushing him out of the town. He looked up at the old man, his eyes burning, his mouth moving, but no sound came out.

"Antelopes?" said the old man, looking from the boy's face to his shoes. "Gazelles?"

The boy thought about it, hesitated, and nodded a quick nod. Almost immediately, he vanished. He just spun about with a whisper, and went off. The door stood empty. The sound of the tennis shoes faded in the jungle heat.

Mr. Sanderson stood in the sun-blazed door, listening. A long time back, in an African film, he remembered the sound. Beautiful creatures leaping under the sky, gone through brush,

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under trees, away, and only the sound of their running left behind.

"Antelopes," said Mr. Sanderson, "gazelles."

He bent to pick up the boy's abandoned winter shoes, heavy with forgotten rains and long-melted snows. Moving out of the blazing sun, walking softly, lightly, slowly, he headed back towards civilization.

★ ★ ★

ANSWERS to TUPPENCE COLOURED on page 24

1. *Red, orange, yellow, green, blue, indigo, and violet.*
2. *Graham Greene, "Brighton Rock;" F. L. Green, "Odd Man Out;" Henry Green, "Loving."*
3. *A collector of porcelain; these terms all originally described certain types of Chinese ceramics.*
4. *Red, red-and-amber, green, amber, red.*
5. *The Blue Grass State is Kentucky, the Golden State, California, and the Green Mountain State, Vermont.*
6. *The order should be: Grey, Black, White.*

SOLUTION to ARGOSY CROSSWORD on page 144

Across. 1, *Bass horns.* 6, *Doric.* 9, *Navigates.* 10, *Safer.* 11, *Asp.* 12, *Fine linen.* 15, *Leeks.* 16, *Cut up.* 19, *Xebec.* 21, *Hal.* 22, *Pub.* 23, *Reset.* 24, *Darts.* 26, *Ruler.* 27, *Belittled.* 31, *Ayr.* 32, *Gutty.* 33, *Eye-pieces.* 35, *Tidal.* 36, *Kimberley.*
Down. 1, *Banff.* 2, *Seven.* 3, *Hegel.* 4, *Rot.* 5, *Susan.* 6, *Displaced.* 7, *Refresher.* 8, *Chrysalis.* 13, *Emu.* 14, *Naxos.* 16, *Copyright.* 17, *Tabulated.* 18, *Portrayal.* 20, *Betel.* 25. *Art.* 27, *Break.* 28, *Twice.* 29, *Local.* 30, *Dusty.* 34, *Elm.*

RESULTS OF STORY TITLE COMPETITION

Readers responded with spirit to our request for an alternative title for John Salt's *Treatment for Shock*—the history of meek little Albert who escaped from drowning and was revived with a fabulous Narvik Sinker which changed his whole career.

In a stack of entries there were some gay variations on the Sink-or-Swim theme and some picturesque allusions to the pink clouds Albert thought he was floating on. We had asked, though, for something that capped the subtitle: "You don't get far in the City clad only in a blanket." We are therefore awarding two guineas to Miss J. Storch, of Du Cane Court, Balham, S.W.17, for her apt and pithy *Lucky Dip.* Honourable mention to Mr. J. Thomson, Isleworth, Middlesex, for *Albert Schnapps out of It.*

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NEXT DOOR TO A WITCH

Those large eyes—that exotic perfume
—Sam found it all very disturbing

BY ROBERT BLAKE

SUSAN WARNE sat up in bed and said, " Darling, we've got a witch next door."

Her husband, Sam, leaned against the newly decorated bedroom wall and studied the morning paper carefully. Without raising his eyes, he said, " That's nice."

" It would be nice if you'd heard a word I've said."

" I know." Sam's paper didn't move. " But then I never do first thing in the morning. It's the penalty you pay for marrying an advertising agent. Work starts with the daily papers."

" I said," his wife repeated carefully, " that we have a witch as a neighbour. The one who arrived the other day and took over Mr. Shultz's old flat. She calls herself Jennifer Brown— "

Comprehension drifted over Sam's good-looking but essentially uncomplicated features. Making what was rather obviously an attempt to be rational, he said, " Oh."

Susan closed her eyes for a moment before asking with a rising inflexion, " What do you mean—*oh*? "

" Well, what makes you think she's a witch? I mean, has she got a broomstick or something? "

" Don't be a fool," Susan said. She pushed her fair hair out of her eyes with the back of her hand, and at the same moment the morning sun came out from behind a cloud and slanted through the window, turning her shoulders to pale gold. Sam let his paper drop and for the first time began to concentrate.

" All right—what has she got, then? "

" I hoped you would tell me. You're the expert on witches."

" *I'm* an expert—".

Susan said defensively, " Well, you wrote a book on them. *Warlocks over England*. Remember? "

" Of course. But I don't *know* anything about them. I'd never have written the book at all if that crazy publisher hadn't had a bee in his bonnet about the subject and decided I was the

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man to write a book on it because I was born under Capricorn—"

"Leo."

"Leo, then. The point is that I looked up the whole damn thing in the public library and rehashed some old newspaper accounts. You know as well as I do that I'm not an expert." Sam paused and considered. "It's all bunk, anyway."

"That's what I thought," Susan admitted. "As a matter of fact, I've been thinking about it all night. You see, at first I thought it was all coincidence. Only, too many things have happened—"

"What sort of things?" Sam asked patiently.

"Oh, just—things," Susan told him. With a growing awareness that the whole thing was sounding more unlikely every minute, she began to explain.

It had all started when the witch had arrived, strictly incognita, to take possession of the flat next door. She had seen her furniture deposited safely by the removal men, spent half an hour checking that it was all there, and then made a bee-line for her nearest neighbour. Susan was in the kitchen when the bell rang, and she answered it with a coffee percolator in one hand and a cookery book tucked uncertainly beneath her other arm.

"Hullo."

The girl in the corridor said in a rush, "I'm Jennifer Brown and I've taken the flat next door."

She was small and slim, with smooth black hair brushed back from her face and tied carelessly with a scarlet bow. Her eyes were large and innocent and seemed to laugh as easily as her rather pleasant mouth.

Without pausing for breath, she went on, "I know I've only been here five minutes, but do you think you could *possibly* give me a shilling for two sixpences? I've got one of those gas-meter things under the sink."

"So have I," Susan said. "Come in and have a cup of coffee while I see what I can do."

"That's awfully sweet of you. I must only stay a minute, though. I've got such a desperate lot to sort out—" She followed her hostess into the kitchen and perched herself on a corner of the table while she looked about her with undisguised admiration. "I suppose my own kitchen will look like this some day—"

Susan laughed. "You should have seen this one a fortnight ago. It's just had its first coat of paint."

She poured a cup of coffee and handed it to her visitor, deciding that she couldn't be much more than twenty-one. "Is this your first flat?"

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" Sort of." Jennifer Brown sipped her coffee appreciatively. " I just had a bed-sitting-room before." She eyed Susan's oven door over the rim of her cup. " What's cooking? It smells wonderful."

" Only a sponge."

" So far as I'm concerned there's no ' only ' about it. Mine always goes flat in the middle." Jennifer slipped off the table and stretched herself like a cat. " Oh well—back to the fray. With any luck I should have at least something straight by this evening."

Susan held out a shilling. " You'd better not forget this."

" Of course. You're an angel." Jennifer took the coin and shook her head ruefully at Susan's hand. " You must tell me how you keep your nails as long as that. I've only got to boil an egg and I break mine."

Susan looked at her own well-manicured hands with a feeling of virtue that she tried to overcome by saying lightly, " It's just a matter of luck. Sometimes they break and sometimes they don't. This is one of the good times."

" Really as simple as that? "

" Well, almost." Susan opened the door for her visitor. " Drop in again when you've got yourself straight. And let me know if there's anything I can do to help."

" I will," Jennifer promised. " You're an angel. 'Bye for now."

" 'Bye." Susan shut the door and went back into the kitchen, thinking with some satisfaction that the new occupant of Flat 13 was an improvement on the last—a large gentleman who played the clarinet in a night club and practised at all hours of the day.

It was at that moment, Susan remembered, that it had all begun. She had taken her sponge out of the oven and noted to her horror that for some reason it was as flat a sponge as ever she had seen.

" That's odd." She prodded the soggy horror tentatively, and then yelped with pain as a burning-hot particle stuck to her finger. With a flick of her wrist she had rubbed it against her apron, only to feel one of her well-cared-for finger-nails bend over at the same time.

" Blast! " Susan said. The nail was cracked irreparably, right across.

" Oh well . . ." She sat looking at her finger for fully a minute before she realized that Jennifer Brown had envied both her sponge and the length of her finger-nails.

From the other side of the room Sam said tolerantly, " Well,

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if that's your idea of a witch putting the jinx on you it isn't mine." He snorted. "Women!"

"It so happens," Susan told him with restraint, "that it isn't just a matter of once or twice. It's *everything*. Everything she—well, envies—goes wrong."

"All right," Sam said. "Tell me what else she's envied."

"Well, Mrs. Willis walked out on me the same day Jennifer Brown said she couldn't find a woman to keep her place clean. You see, she liked her."

"But, for heaven's sake, nobody can keep chars these days! You've only got to look under *Help Wanted* in the local papers to see that." Sam picked up his own paper again with determination. "Anyway, you can't go around accusing people of being witches in this day and age. It's not scientific—"

"Do you think I *like* the idea of living next door to a—sort of monster? Do you think I'd make it up if it wasn't true?" Susan gulped. "Even the cat's left home since she moved in. It sits outside her door rubbing itself up against her milk bottles—"

"All right," Sam sighed. "What do you want to do about it?"

"We could move."

"When we've waited two years to get this flat? Now I know you're crazy!" Sam looked at the clock on the dressing-table and dropped his newspaper as though it were red-hot. "Look, if you've really got a witch up your sleeve you might try putting her to work getting breakfast in the mornings. I'm going to be late—"

"It's only eight o'clock."

"I know, but I wanted to get into the office early this morning." Sam picked up a pair of shoes without enthusiasm. He thought the matter over. "I suppose I can always take the car—"

Susan sighed a little wearily. "It won't be any good. You might just as well go by train."

Her husband stared at her. "Why?"

"Because," Susan told him, "Miss Brown looked at our car yesterday and said something about wishing she'd got one too. I must admit I expected it to go up in flames on the spot. Actually it still *looks* all right. But if you expect it to start, I should say you've got another think coming."

Sam shrugged into his jacket and grinned. "Bet you five bob."

"It simply isn't worth it," Susan told him. She got out of bed reluctantly and pulled on a housecoat. "It's like betting against oneself."

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They ate breakfast in a strained silence and went out to the garage. Sam produced an ignition key. "What," he inquired, "is the betting it'll start?"

"I've already told you," Susan said. "But don't let that stop you. Go ahead and try." She watched him climb in and press the starter. The engine turned over obligingly and stopped

Sam looked out of the car window. "She's cold," he said defensively. The starter whirred desperately without further result.

"You see?"

"But the whole thing's ridiculous," Sam said. There was little conviction in his tone.

"I know," Susan agreed. "Quite ridiculous. But you see what I mean?"

Sam got out of the car and stood looking at it. There was, Susan was pleased to see, a slightly hunted look in his eyes. He said, "But if she can do that to a car, she can do—well—anything—" He ran his fingers through his hair. Then, "You've met her. What sort of a—girl is she?"

"She's pretty, and thoroughly friendly," Susan told him.

"There's no—peculiarity?"

"If you mean," Susan said, "a broomstick in the corner of the living-room and a cauldron on the fire, I don't think it's likely. Witch she may be, but she's civilized."

"Perhaps if you talked to her . . .?"

Susan said with some feeling, "I don't see why I should risk having myself turned into a frog or something. I suggest we leave her well alone."

"You haven't exactly interfered with her as it is," Sam pointed out. "Look, I'll try and find out something about this. In the meantime be friendly. Bake her a cake or something." He glanced at his watch. "I must fly." He kissed Susan hurriedly. "'Bye, sweet. Take care of yourself."

"That," Susan told his retreating figure, "is a not inappropriate thought." She walked back into the block of flats and knocked with some trepidation on the door of No. 13.

Jennifer Brown answered it and smiled delightedly. "Hullo."

"Hullo," Susan said. "Do you think I could come in?"

"Of course." The dark girl looked slightly puzzled.

"Thank you." Susan followed Jennifer into the lounge and looked about her curiously. It was, she had to admit to herself, a very ordinary room, full of very ordinary furniture; there was nothing to suggest that it might be a witch's den. Perhaps the vacuum cleaner, propped up in a corner, looked vaguely reminiscent, but apart from that there was nothing, absolutely nothing

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to which the most enthusiastic witch-hunter could take exception.

Jennifer Brown came back into the room with two cups of coffee and curled herself comfortably on the arm of a chair. She surveyed her visitor curiously. "Well?"

Somewhat at a loss, Susan said, "I don't quite know where to start." Then the word rang a bell for her and she went on, "The car wouldn't go this morning."

"Oh!" Jennifer Brown put a hand to her mouth and stared at Susan with wide, worried eyes. Susan's heart gave a sudden uncomfortable lurch and she said, "So you *do* know something about it?"

"Honestly," Jennifer Brown said, "I didn't mean to stop it."

Susan held out her right hand, displaying as she did so four long, filbert-shaped nails and one very short one. Reproachfully she demanded, "And what about that?"

"That was the same. I didn't mean that either."

Susan said slowly, "Are you trying to make me believe that—that you're a sort of—"

"Witch?"

"A sort of witch," Susan nodded gratefully, "against your will?"

Jennifer Brown dropped her eyes and confessed that that was indeed the case, so far as it went. Only it wasn't altogether true about her witchiness being involuntary, because that really depended on other people more than herself—

Susan stared. "You're—quite sure?"

Jennifer Brown nodded. "Oh yes, quite sure. You see, my mother was one, too. It runs in families." She looked at Susan with wide, appealing eyes. "The trouble is that I'm not very good. My sister was much better, but she married a GI and went to live in America."

Susan heard herself saying wildly, "How nice for her," and then managed to control herself with an effort. "Is there much difference between a good witch and a bad one? Technically, I mean?"

"Oh yes," Jennifer Brown told her. "All the difference in the world. For one thing, a good witch can do things to order. I can't." She sighed. "It's an awful nuisance sometimes. I mean, my sister would never have broken that nail of yours. Not unless she *wanted* to, anyway."

"Do you mean to say," Susan demanded, "that *all* your family are witches?"

"Only the girls," Jennifer assured her.

"So, with your sister and your mother, there are three of you loose at the moment?"

Jennifer shook her head. "Oh no, I'm the only one now."

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"But you said—"

"I know." Jennifer Brown blushed attractively and looked down at the floor. "But you see, we lose our power when we lose—when we get married—"

"Oh!" Susan thought that over. "Well, if in the meantime you *could* manage to—forget us . . ."

"Oh, I'll try," Jennifer Brown promised quickly. "I mean, you've been sweet to me and I feel so ashamed of myself when I think of you and your poor husband—" her voice trailed away. "By the way, what's your husband like? I've never seen him."

"Sam?" For a moment Susan was almost caught unawares. Then she said rapidly, "Well, he *looks* all right but—" She had a quick vision of what might happen to Sam if the black-haired girl in front of her should feel lonely—"I'm afraid he's not half as good as he looks," she went on desperately.

"He's not?"

"No." Susan shook her head. "For one thing he's got a perfectly frightful temper. And then, I hate to have to admit it, but Sam—well—I suppose he has to drink a fair amount for business reasons—"

Jennifer Brown said sympathetically, "Darling, of course I understand. It must be terrible for you."

Susan said bravely, "Oh, it could be worse. And of course, I'm terribly fond of Sam, even when he does knock me about—"

Jennifer Brown said earnestly, "If there's anything I can possibly do to help at any time—"

"I'll remember," Susan said.

Sam arrived home that evening clutching an astonishingly ugly china bull. Susan stared at it, fascinated.

Her husband placed his treasure carefully on the table and regarded it with satisfaction. "That, in case you don't know, is genuine coloured delf."

"How much did you pay for it?" Susan asked warily.

"Three pounds," Sam told her happily. "Three pounds from a second-hand shop, and he's worth at least seventy-five." He stroked the creature's glazed nose. "We'll call him Moo Cow."

Moo Cow leered at Susan and she looked away hurriedly. "About the Brown girl—"

"Lord," Sam said, "I'd forgotten. Whatever you do, keep this thing out of her sight. If she likes the look of it, something frightful will probably happen."

Susan said coldly, "I haven't noticed any effort to keep me out of her way. Or is Moo Cow more important?"

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Sam ignored that. " Well, what happened? "

Susan explained, then stopped as Sam began to laugh. " What's so funny, anyway? "

" We've only got to get your witch married and the whole thing solves itself." He scratched his chin reflectively. " Not even married, if it comes to that—"

" There's no need to be coarse."

" I'm being practical, that's all. I mean, we could always introduce her to Alistair Duncan or someone like that. He's always in great demand, and it's high time he had a wife anyway."

" Darling, that's all very well, but we can't—"

" I don't see why not," Sam said.

Susan said dryly, " Can you *imagine* Alistair married? "

" Well, not exactly," Sam admitted. " But I suppose it's got to happen some time. And, after all, it's nothing to do with us what a girl does with her opportunities—"

" No," Susan agreed doubtfully, " I suppose not."

" Well, then—" Sam subsided into the nearest chair. " All you've got to do is to fix up a foursome with Miss Brown, back out at the last minute, and leave the field to Alistair." He glanced at his watch. " Look, you go and line up Jennifer while I get Alistair on the phone. Tell her to be ready at eight."

When Susan got back a quarter of an hour later she found Sam just putting the phone down. She said smugly, " Jennifer's all for it. What about Alistair? "

" Out of town," Sam told her.

" Do you know where? "

" Unlikely though it sounds, he's spending a couple of days with an aunt at Bray. He says he'll come if he's fetched. He's lent his car to a friend."

Susan looked doubtful. " Does that mean you're going to fetch him? "

" I can't. Got to wait in for a phone call from a man who might buy Moo Cow. If anyone goes, it'll have to be you."

Susan sighed. " All right. The car's started going again, anyway. See you in a couple of hours."

At a quarter to seven, Susan rang up. " Darling, we're stuck! I don't know exactly *where* we are, but there's the sweetest old country inn—that's where I'm phoning from. It's about five miles from Bray, I think."

Trying to make it sound as though it didn't matter, Sam asked, " And the car? "

" Darling, it's hardly damaged at all. It's just in a ditch and it doesn't seem to want to come out—"

" Have you phoned a garage? "

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"Yes. But they say they can't get along for at least a couple of hours." There was a pause. "I'm sorry, darling, but it does rather look as if we'll have to miss tonight. I've just no idea when I shall get home . . . You'd better break the news to Jennifer. She'll wonder what's happening if nobody arrives."

"All right," Sam said. "I'll tell her." He put the phone down and made for the door. Halfway there, he caught sight of his reflection in the mirror. Sam stopped and surveyed himself without enthusiasm. Admittedly, he wasn't going anywhere. But even so there was no getting round it, his shirt was crumpled and it was a good many hours since his last shave . . .

Half an hour later Sam was knocking on the door of Flat 13. Somebody pattered to the door and opened it.

"Hullo there," Jennifer Brown said.

Sam looked at her. After a while he said, "I'm Sam Warne. Susan—my wife—"

"Oh, of course." She smiled. "Do come in."

"Thanks." Sam found himself inside without having been conscious of getting there. He noticed for the first time that his hostess was wearing an ankle-length housecoat of red silk, covered discreetly with dragons in gold thread. The silk seemed both thin and close-fitting.

Sam said, rather louder than he intended, "Susan asked me to tell you that we've rather slipped up over this evening. You see, she and Major Duncan have had a slight accident in the car—"

Jennifer Brown covered her mouth with a long, slender hand. "You don't mean they're *hurt*—"

"Oh no, nothing like that. They're just stranded too far in the wilds to be here, that's all. So perhaps another night—"

"Of course." Jennifer perched herself on the edge of the settee and regarded Sam with interest. "Have a drink?"

"Er, thanks." Sam forced himself to look at something other than Jennifer Brown.

"Sherry?"

"Fine." She had very long legs, Sam decided. When she crossed the room one saw them to their best advantage.

With her back to him, she observed reflectively, "You don't *look* as though you would treat your wife badly."

Sam came down to earth abruptly. "Who said I did?"

"Your wife." Miss Brown smiled sweetly at him as she turned back with a glass in her hand.

"Oh!" Sam took the drink, wishing his hand would stop shaking. "I—I expect she was pulling your leg."

"Do you think so?" The girl in the housecoat was standing very close to him and for the first time he noticed the faint, rather

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exotic perfume she was wearing. She had very large eyes that seemed to turn up at the corners. Somehow Sam found it remarkably hard to look away from them . . .

" I think you're rather nice," said Jennifer Brown.

A little less than a week later Jennifer came to say good-bye.

Susan said, " It seems such a shame you're going. We never had that evening out."

" I know. But I've had the most wonderful offer of a job." Jennifer glanced at her watch. " I must fly! "

Carefully keeping the relief out of her voice, Susan said, " You'll drop us a line to let us know how you're getting on? Sam and I will be awfully hurt if you don't, won't we, darling? "

Sam was engrossed in dusting Moo Cow. " Of course she must write to us." They all drifted onto the landing.

Eyeing the brightly coloured animal cradled in Sam's arms, Jennifer said, " That's delf, isn't it? "

His hands defensively round the smooth china, Sam said shortly, " Yes."

" It's heavenly." An acquisitive gleam showed in Jennifer's eye. " I'd give anything to own a piece like that. I don't know when I've envied anything so much—"

Sam heard Susan's strangled gasp from the other side of the landing and looked up to find himself meeting her horrified gaze. Instinctively he gripped Moo Cow even tighter. And then, for the first time, came the cold, certain knowledge that it wasn't necessary. Moo Cow rested firmly and tranquilly in his hands. Would continue to do so, because it didn't matter how much Jennifer Brown envied a thing any more . . .

For one long, timeless moment Sam stood there, taking in the dawning look of comprehension in Jennifer's eyes. Almost feeling the agonized anticipation in Susan's.

I think you love Moo Cow more than me. That was what Susan had said, Sam thought glumly. And of course it wasn't true. Not even if delf bulls were fetching seventy-five pounds—

Abruptly Sam made up his mind. With considerable artistry he shifted his lower hand and appeared to fumble. He backed to the banisters. " Susan! I can't hold it—"

Carefully, calculatingly, and with malice aforethought, he dropped Moo Cow down three flights of stairs . . .

* * *

Very sory. No milk. Oxes gone sick. Cows milked and retailed.

Notice on Chinese dairy

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THE LITTLE DOG LAUGHED

Black-haired, saucy, slim
she pushed the door open

BY L. W. GODFREY

"THE only witness of the accident," said Mr. Burchett, "was an elderly lady. The police are basing their prosecution of our client almost entirely upon her evidence. She is a widow, her name is Mrs. Berenice O'Connor, and she is, so I have learnt, a very odd old lady."

Mr. Burchett, senior partner in the legal firm of Burchett and Smith, leaned back in the comfort of the aged armchair in the chambers of Mr. Fearndale Hawke-Hewlitt, Q.C., and rubbed his bony hands together. "Somehow," he added, "we've got to discredit Mrs. O'Connor's story."

"Naturally," said Mr. Hawke-Hewlitt icily.

Mr. Fearndale Hawke-Hewlitt, Q.C., had listened with a disdainful expression on his pale moon face, his bright black eyes like two sunken craters. He had condescended to accept the brief because the client was Daniel Cartermaine, known, rather loosely, as a financier and, less loosely, as a millionaire.

The only difficulty was Mrs. O'Connor. The police appeared to have a cast-iron case that Cartermaine had been driving at something like seventy miles an hour on the wrong side of the road, had mounted the pavement in the village of Ferrydale to avoid a parked car, and had crashed into the porch of Rose Cottage, considerably damaging the house and his car, but not, by some miracle, himself. At the time, Mrs. O'Connor had been across the road outside her own front gate and, according to the police statement, "saw it all."

"I think," said Hawke-Hewlitt at last, "it would be best if I myself were to pay a call on this Mrs. O'Connor. I can then decide exactly how I shall conduct the case." Mr. Burchett smirked his obeisance; he was almost overcome with admiration for the great man's attention to detail. Hawke-Hewlitt took a cigarette from a gold case, lit it with a gold lighter, and became so unaware of the solicitor's presence that that individual felt

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constrained to withdraw quietly from the chambers, leaving Hawke-Hewlitt, his head floating in a cloud of smoke like the full moon on a misty night, as he contemplated the ceiling.

Hawke-Hewlitt instructed his chauffeur to park the limousine down a side road, and then entered the gate of Tao Cottage. He walked up the path and surveyed the lavish, crowded excitement of the flower-beds, a patchwork quilt of colour, an air-corridor of hovering perfumes which warmed the senses.

"An untidy mind," commented Hawke-Hewlitt, and he thumped heavily on the door with the polished brass knocker, a sneering monkey's head. The door opened so quickly that he knew his arrival had been watched from behind the curtains.

Hawke-Hewlitt found himself looking down on a tiny, grey-haired woman who must have been well under five feet in height. She was as slim-waisted as a girl of twenty, and her face was smooth. Only the creases at eyes and mouth, laughter-creases, gave away her age which, Hawke-Hewlitt knew, was seventy-five. Her eyes were blue and clear.

Hawke-Hewlitt gave her his open, affable type of smile, and stepped into the little hall.

"I saw you arrive in your car," exclaimed Mrs. O'Connor, "so I put the kettle on at once. You really are lucky coming here today because only this morning I made my cakes for the whist drive at the Old People's Home—one must do all one can to make the old people happy, mustn't one?—but I don't see why we shouldn't cut into the raspberry sponge, because it's really the best in Ferrydale, even if I do say so myself."

"I've come to see you," said Hawke-Hewlitt, "about the—"

"About the accident, of course," put in Mrs. O'Connor. "I knew that as soon as I saw you. I've had different people here nearly every day since it happened. I suppose I shouldn't say it but it's made life quite exciting. I've had some lovely policemen. Oh yes, and Mrs. Brown's solicitors—she's the owner of the house the car crashed into—they were sweet. Who are you?"

Hawke-Hewlitt produced his card, and Mrs. O'Connor fussed around for her glasses and put them on to read his name. Hawke-Hewlitt made a mental note of the fact. "I shall be appearing for the driver of the car involved," he explained.

"Oh dear," said Mrs. O'Connor, "what a pity! But never mind. We can't all be on the side of right."

She suddenly seized Hawke-Hewlitt's hat, ringed it expertly onto a hook on the bamboo hall-stand, and showed the way into the front room. "Take a seat, Mr. Hawke," she said. "And I'll make that tea I'm sure you're longing for it."

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Hawke-Hewlitt found himself in a room which was crammed with gongs, idols, bamboo chairs, and glass cases of stuffed birds and snakes, and a monkey. Hanging on the walls were framed collections of hideous insects. Over the mantelpiece was a photograph of Mrs. O'Connor's late husband, a massive gentleman whose eyes had glared straight into the camera lens, like a hunter who did not believe in taking his eyes off the target. The very disconcerting result was, so Hawke-Hewlitt soon discovered, that wherever he was in the room the eyes watched him fiercely.

Hawke-Hewlitt chose a chair with its back to the mantelpiece, but then found that the almond eyes of a buddha stared coldly at him, while the vicious, hexapod bodies of the hideous insects in the frames made his rather flabby flesh twitch with creepiness.

Mrs. O'Connor suddenly entered. "Here we are," she said cheerfully. "Tea." She placed the tray on an ebony table, and seated herself opposite Hawke-Hewlitt.

"I expect you find this room a little strange," she said. "My husband and I spent much of our life in China. We worked in a hospital there, you know, and these are just a few of the things he collected—things with sentimental associations."

Mrs. O'Connor paused as she poured the steaming, pale amber liquid into the cups, and Hawke-Hewlitt shifted his position slightly, to avoid the beady stare of the monkey which clung for eternity to a branch in its glass cage.

"That's Boswell," she said, catching the direction of Hawke-Hewlitt's eyes. "He was our pet monkey and wonderfully clever, and Dr. O'Connor was a great admirer of the *Life* . . ."

"Now, about the accident," said Hawke-Hewlitt firmly, "there are just one or two points I want to clear up."

"Have a piece of raspberry sponge," offered Mrs. O'Connor.

Hawke-Hewlitt accepted the sponge. "Now, tell me frankly," he persisted. "Do you really feel you can say that the car coming towards you—towards you, mind, for you were on the bend of the road—was doing seventy miles an hour?"

"Dr. O'Connor was a racing driver at one time," said Mrs. O'Connor. "I used to watch him driving at Brooklands, twenty years ago. Dr. O'Connor always said I was better than a stop-watch for judging speed."

Hawke-Hewlitt took a mouthful of cake, glared at Boswell, and, finding no comfort there, let his eyes rest on the armoured bodies of the impaled insects.

"Dr. O'Connor was something of an entomologist," explained Mrs. O'Connor. "Did you know that there are over half a million species of insect? Dr. O'Connor himself discovered more than fifty new types in China."

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"Dr. O'Connor must have been a remarkable man," said Hawke-Hewlitt with something of an edge to his voice.

"He was indeed," said Mrs. O'Connor; she raised her eyes above Hawke-Hewlitt's head to the photograph over the mantelpiece, and she smiled so radiantly that Hawke-Hewlitt was able to visualize the loveliness that had once been hers.

"My client says," went on Hawke-Hewlitt, hurriedly shaking himself free of sentiment, "that another car, which did not stop, forced him off the road. Are you sure there wasn't another car?"

"The only other car in sight," said Mrs. O'Connor very clearly, "was parked by the kerb. If your Mr. Cartermaine hadn't been on the wrong side of the road, he wouldn't have had to swerve so violently that he lost control."

Hawke-Hewlitt permitted a faint frown to mar his bland features, for Mrs. O'Connor was only too obviously going to be an excellent witness—for the prosecution. The whole room seemed to press down on him, and he felt that the insects and the idols, the stuffed birds and snakes, Dr. O'Connor and Boswell were all mocking him.

"You are quite sure," he said, in a voice coldly implying that Mrs. O'Connor could not possibly be quite sure, "that my client's car was on the wrong side of the road?"

"Of course I'm sure," smiled Mrs. O'Connor. "And Lilian agreed with me. Lilian was there, too, and she says the car was on the wrong side of the road."

"Lilian?" exclaimed Hawke-Hewlitt. "I thought you were the only witness?"

"Oh dear," said Mrs. O'Connor, "I didn't mean to mention her, but you seem to doubt my word so much, I just had to."

"I'd like to have a word with her if possible."

"Of course it's possible," said Mrs. O'Connor. "She's in the kitchen." Mrs. O'Connor rose and half opened the door. "Lilian! Lilian!" she called. "Come here, please."

A moment later the door pushed wider open and in stepped a black-haired, bright-eyed, slim-bodied French poodle.

"This is Lilian," said Mrs. O'Connor. "Lilian, this is Mr. Hawke."

Lilian's intelligent eyes appraised Hawke-Hewlitt, and if there was a momentary quiver of her nostrils, she was too well-bred to display any other sign of distaste.

"And—er—Lilian actually witnessed the accident?" asked Hawke-Hewlitt in his most honeyed tone.

"Oh yes," said Mrs. O'Connor. "Didn't you, Lilian?"

Lilian barked.

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"You see!" exclaimed Mrs. O'Connor. "But I'm afraid I've not told anybody because, well, it's just a wee bit embarrassing, as she was, well, in the gutter at the time; you understand what I mean, don't you? But she told me afterwards that she saw the car coming terribly fast and absolutely on the wrong side of the road."

"She said that, did she?" murmured Hawke-Hewlitt, his moon face now bland. He rose to leave, well satisfied that he had got what he needed, and thanked Mrs. O'Connor profusely for the tea and raspberry sponge. He took one last glance at the doctor, and nodded affably to the idol; Boswell he ignored.

"See you in court," he called to Mrs. O'Connor, a few minutes later as he walked down the flower-edged path.

When Mrs. O'Connor entered the witness-box she gave such a clear and concise account of the accident that the chairman of the Bench congratulated her.

Mr. Fearndale Hawke-Hewlitt sat beside Mr. Burchett and listened benignly. He had made sure that, when cross-examining the police, he had established beyond doubt that the charge could not stand on the circumstantial evidence alone. Skid-marks and damage supported Mrs. O'Connor's story, but the whole case rested on her evidence, and the reliability of this Hawke-Hewlitt intended to destroy.

Hawke-Hewlitt rose and performed his favourite mannerism of pushing his wig askew to scratch his head and twitching the end of his plump nose, a mannerism befitting a Q.C. The courtroom was clearly impressed, and the Bench was almost overawed by the unusual presence of a counsel renowned for his success in higher courts.

"Mrs. O'Connor," said Hawke-Hewlitt, in his resonant voice, "please look at the plan of the scene of the accident."

Mrs. O'Connor took the map handed to her, placed it on the edge of the box, and plunged her hand into her bag, to produce her glasses.

"Cannot you see the plan clearly without glasses?" demanded Hawke-Hewlitt.

"Good gracious, no," said Mrs. O'Connor.

"And yet you claim you saw the car when it was over a quarter of a mile away?"

Mrs. O'Connor pulled off her glasses.

"I couldn't see you with them on," she said. "But now I can see you perfectly. I'm very long-sighted, you know."

The chairman of the Bench repressed a titter, and a ripple of laughter passed through the courtroom.

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"Tell me, Mrs. O'Connor," went on the somewhat disconcerted Q.C., "tell me . . ." Hawke-Hewlitt hesitated with well-timed deliberation—"tell me, was there not, perhaps, another witness of the accident? A witness whose identity you have intentionally withheld from the court?"

Mrs. O'Connor twisted her hands nervously, and looked appealingly at Hawke-Hewlitt. There was a stir in the court.

"Was it not a little lady by the name of Lilian?" pressed Hawke-Hewlitt. Mrs. O'Connor closed her eyes tightly.

"Who is Lilian?" asked the chairman.

"Lilian," said Mrs. O'Connor very softly, "is my little dog, my poodle."

Hawke-Hewlitt leapt to take advantage of the situation, to expose the witness for the madwoman she really was.

"Mrs. O'Connor," he thundered, "did not your dog tell you that she saw the accident? did not your poodle tell you that?"

Mrs. O'Connor drew herself up to her full four feet ten.

"Don't be absurd," she said. "Who ever heard of a dog talking!"

Daniel Cartermaine was fined twenty pounds for dangerous driving, and was disqualified from holding a licence for one year.

Hawke-Hewlitt left the court a shaken man, and the first thing he saw outside the building was Lilian, being held on a leash by a small child. At the same moment Mrs. O'Connor bustled out, and Hawke-Hewlitt, none too graciously, raised his hat.

"Oh dear," said Mrs. O'Connor to him, "I hope you'll forgive me, Mr. Hawke. I do feel just a wee bit wicked. I know what you must be thinking of me for telling such an awful lie in court. But, you see, Lilian is so nervous, so highly-strung, I really couldn't let her be put in the witness-box to be cross-examined."

As Mrs. O'Connor took the lead, Lilian looked up at Hawke-Hewlitt, bared her white teeth in a poodle grin, and barked. To Mr. Fearndale Hawke-Hewlitt, Q.C., it sounded unpleasantly like "Ha ha!"

★ ★ ★

RECIPE FOR OYSTERS IN GRAVY BASTARD

Take grete Oystrys, an schale hem; an take the water of the Oystrys, & ale, an brede y-straynid, an the water also, an put it on a potte, an Gyngere, Sugre, Saffron, powder pepir, and Salt, an let it boyle wyl; then put yn the Oystrys ther-to, an dresse it forth.

Harleian MS

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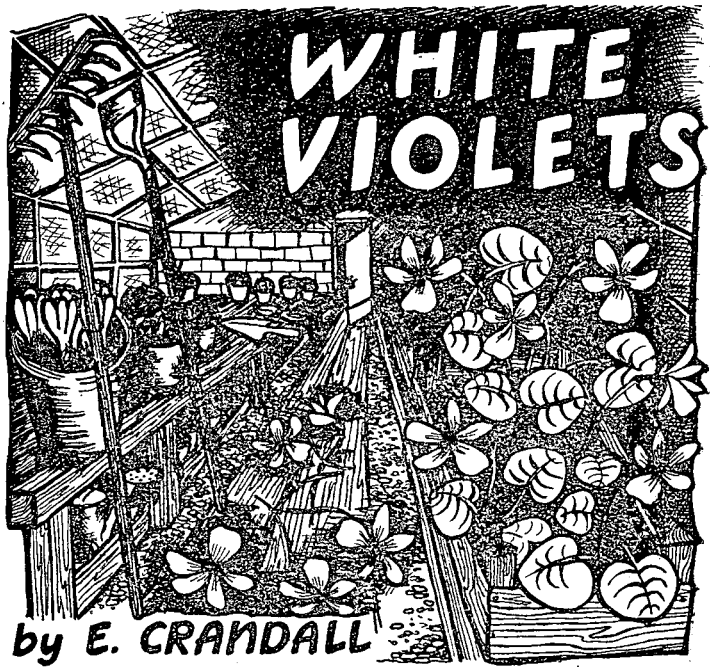

THE English butler showed me to my room with an obsequious formality that was embarrassing. The room was large, even for this vast rambling mansion of Northview. It was dominated by an enormous mahogany bed and dark velvet draperies fringed with faded yellow balls of yarn. The bay windows looked out over the lawns to the greenhouse and the cliff. Perkins moved about like a wax dummy, pointing out the house phone and the typewriter.

"Dinner is at eight, miss. Mrs. Porter will expect you to join her at seven-thirty for cocktails." He turned and said with hypocritical solicitude: "I hope you will be comfortable here, miss?"

"Oh yes, thank you, Perkins."

"I thought you would like this room because of the view of the water. That's why Miss Fain preferred it."

"Miss Fain?"

"Your predecessor, Mrs. Porter's former secretary, miss." With that he left me, shutting the door softly behind him.

I looked around the room. There was nothing here to evoke its former occupant. Uneasily I walked to the window. Out on the grey Atlantic a fat freighter was moving slowly in towards Narragansett Bay. I don't belong here, I thought; I'll never fit in.

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I turned from the window and decided to go downstairs and start my duties by seeing about the flowers. I found my way out of Northview, and followed the gravelled drive down through the English gardens, to where the greenhouse perched on the edge of the cliff. I opened a small door, bent down, and went inside. The fetid air within had almost the effect of ether. From somewhere a voice said, " Close the door." Automatically I obeyed.

In the greenish haze I saw a young man in blue jeans bending in intense concentration over something in the frame before him.

" Mrs. Porter? " he asked. Only then did he look up.

The expression intended for Mrs. Porter surprised me. The set of the mouth was more than merely sullen.

" I'm Mrs. Porter's new secretary."

" Let me be the first to offer you sympathy. I don't have to ask if you're a Miss. She wouldn't have the other kind. Miss what? "

" Susan Stone," I said, bewildered.

" Bill Coles. Keeper of the English gardens, procurer of cut flowers for the dinner table. And graves."

In that instant, looking into his angular face with the bright, mocking eyes, an amazing and very disturbing thing happened to me. Without reason or logic or even any conscious motivation, I thought: *Yes.*

Shocked, even scandalized, at the vehemence of that mental yes, I stumbled into words, anything to push aside this idiotic idea.

" Would you mind telling me what you were looking at? "

One suntanned hand caressed the microscope. " A little exploratory work. My hobby. Maybe some day you'll see it in the papers. *William Coles, brilliant young scientist who made barren soil produce again.*"

" We could certainly use you where I come from. We have a farm in Vermont that hasn't produced even a dandelion in years."

" Landed gentry, eh? "

" Hardly. I only own about a tenth of the place; the rest belongs to the bank. I work for a living."

He grinned. " You make it sound like the heroic act of the decade. It's no exceptional trick, Miss Secretary. As a matter of fact—" He stopped as though remembering something, and the grin died away. " Sorry." For a moment there was an expression of pain in his eyes. I couldn't understand why he had apologized; there seemed to be about him an odd atmosphere of guilt.

" Don't look so puzzled. You'll get used to me. I hope. Why not begin getting used to me by going to a movie with me tomorrow night? There's a good Italian film."

" Perhaps—" I heard myself saying—" if I can get off."

" Good. What do you think of the palace and its inmates? "

" I've only met Mrs. Porter and Perkins."

" Wait until you meet the others! And Mrs. Porter? "

" I don't know what to think. Apparently she is very kind."

His reaction was disturbing. The sullen look was back on his face. " Kind? Has she been telling you to be kind to me? "

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" Kind to you? What a funny thing to say. Why should she? "

" You don't know, then," he said harshly, " about Sylvia Fain."

" Miss Fain. The girl who had my job? Mrs. Porter told me she was emotionally unstable."

" Maybe."

" What was she frightened of? " He said nothing. The hand resting on the table tensed and closed into a fist.

" Mr. Coles," I said hesitantly, " I've come for the flowers."

He turned away. With a gesture he indicated the depths of the greenhouse. " Be my guest! " His tone was no longer friendly.

I stood there helplessly, annoyed at having to make an admission of weakness. There was no other way out. When I didn't move, he turned, eyebrows raised mockingly, " Well? "

I blurted out, " I know very little about arranging flowers."

He watched me for a moment, then said abruptly, " You're as helpless as she was! Sit down here. I'll get them. It's no problem. The same thing has gone on the table for the past forty years."

Rather primly I sat on the high stool. He took a small pair of shears from the wall. " How did Miss Fain die? " I asked.

The hand with the shears stopped in mid air. He didn't look at me. " Two months ago last Sunday morning they found her body at the foot of the cliff. It was—it was suicide."

He disappeared into the depths of the greenhouse. I sat on the stool, absorbing the shock of his words. Suicide! But why?

Darkness was falling around the glass roof. Bill Coles was somewhere back in the greenhouse but I heard no sound. Beneath his casual, even intimate manner there was something odd about him, something that I couldn't quite fathom. Something wary. The dark shadow of evening crept along the earthen floor. Why hadn't he turned on the lights? What was taking him so long?

Suddenly, without any warning sound, he was beside me, very close. Startled, I turned.

" You'll need better control of your nerves if you're going to last long here! "

" There's nothing wrong with my nerves," I said coldly. " I'm just not used to having people creep up behind me! "

" Sorry." He held out a silver bowl in which flowers were arranged according to colour and size. " That's about the way she likes it. White violets in the centre. Never forget that. Always white violets."

I slid off the stool and took the bowl from him. His hand brushed against mine. I drew quickly away.

" You've got a very pretty smile. I hope you manage to keep that smile around here."

" I'll manage all right." I started for the door.

Behind me, he said, " You will if you mind your own business! "

I turned. " Why—why, that sounds like a threat."

" No, just a warning." His voice was soft. " Sylvia didn't know how to mind her own business. Look what happened to her."

" You said it was suicide."

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" Did I? " In the gloom I couldn't see his face clearly. He was a shadow bulking very large and still against the last blurred light from the glass roof. I pushed open the door, and began hurrying towards the house through the growing dusk. Suddenly I wanted very much to reach it before complete darkness. Halfway to the house I saw a figure move away from a lighted upstairs window. Was it the window of Mrs. Porter's green-and-gold sitting-room? The white violets brushed against my fingers . . .

A clock whirred and boomed the quarter-hour as I stood at the door to the drawing-room. At the far end of the vast room was a fireplace big enough for the roasting of a sheep. Above it was a portrait of a man in hunting pink, with shiny boots, and a crop clutched in a small white hand. He was a short man with an almost abnormally small face. But the head was held at an arrogant angle and the eyes seemed to be telling the world what he thought of it, something not very pleasant.

" That's Mrs. Porter's father," said a woman's voice heavy with accent. " ' Lucky ' Smith. Last of the Robber Barons."

Startled, I turned. Deep in two high-backed chairs by the fireplace sat a man and a woman. Obviously they had been sitting there in complete silence.

The woman said, " You're Mrs. Porter's new secretary? "

" Susan Stone."

" I'm Miss Ospensky. This is Mr. Carol." Mr. Carol got up, glass in hand, nodded, and sat down again in one continuous, disinterested motion. His colour was high—too high; his grey-black hair, carefully brushed and oiled; his tweed coat, well cut.

No hands were offered. I sat down. Miss Ospensky held her head as though it had once been beautiful, perhaps to distract attention from her body, which was squat and ugly. She was probably older than Mr. Carol, and the great shock of dubious red hair, the scarlet lipstick carelessly applied, the heavy layer of powder did little to disprove it. An astonishing number of bracelets on her pudgy arms rattled when she moved.

Into the silence I said, " Is Mrs. Porter expecting other guests? "

Mr. Carol managed to part with his cocktail for a moment. " We are the honoured—" his voice treasured its own malice—" the honoured and the only guests at Northview."

Puzzled, I asked, " You are visiting Mrs. Porter? "

" My dear child, I have been a guest in Mrs. Porter's house for sixteen years. But Fira here holds priority. Her service stripes attest to a stint of nineteen years.

" The mores of the permanent house guest," he continued in the same wearily ironic tone, " is a subject for some interesting research."

Miss Ospensky gave me a melodramatically apologetic smile and surreptitiously indicated his cocktail glass.

" Howard is joking. But to be serious, we are the only guests. Mrs. Porter is not amused by Newport society."

Then, for the first time, I remembered the absent Mr. Porter.

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" Has Mr. Porter been away a long time? "

" My dear! You don't know? " Miss Ospensky cried.

" Mr. Porter has been away, all right," Mr. Carol said, " for a very long time. But his enforced separation from his wife has not prevented his spirit from permeating every nook and cranny of this house. It has been sick with waiting—for forty years."

" *Forty years?* "

" Yes. Forty years suspended in time. A ghost of a bridegroom. But now, alas, the ghost materializes and the mortals lose their place in the scheme of things. He arrives on Christmas Eve. In exactly forty-eight hours."

" Are you telling me that Mr. Porter has been away for forty years? But why? Where? "

" For the past forty years of his life, the not-so-Honourable Vance Porter has been in an English gaol, repenting a murder."

Miss Ospensky straightened up with a sharp intake of breath. In the doorway stood Mrs. Porter, wearing a simple black gown.

She was a woman of about sixty, tall and slim. Her face was neither beautiful nor aristocratic in the accepted sense of that term, but it reflected the shadow of a youth that must have been alive and quick and very lovely. I was astonished by the eyes—a very light blue, clear and pale, yet almost completely devoid of expression. I had no idea of what she was thinking.

If she had overheard Mr. Carol's words she gave no sign. He struggled to his feet, his cynicism disintegrating into alarm.

" Why, Marian! " he said. " We were just talking about you."

" Were you, Howard? I'm flattered. I can't think of a more uninteresting subject."

Stunned by Mr. Carol's revelation, I watched her come slowly down the room. I heard Miss Ospensky's macabre laugh. That laugh was to become for me the sound of Northview, just as the sweet dankness of the greenhouse was to become the odour, and Mrs. Porter's eyes, which never told me anything at all, the look.

The dinner table was an oasis amidst a desert of silence in which Perkins and two maids moved in grave unison.

Miss Ospensky and Mr. Carol were regaling Mrs. Porter with details of a play they had seen that afternoon in Boston, to which they had been taken, I gathered, in Mrs. Porter's limousine.

Mrs. Porter suddenly interrupted their derisive comments. The moment she spoke I felt a tension in the room. " The chauffeur tells me you talked with Mrs. Billings outside the theatre."

The effect of this remark was astonishing. The " guests " exchanged a look of dismay.

" Marian! " exclaimed Miss Ospensky, " You know neither of us would ever set foot in that woman's house. Not after—"

Mrs. Porter sighed. " That's extremely loyal of you, Fira. I'm told," she added, " that the poor woman is in financial difficulties. Headlands will be difficult for her to maintain on a limited income."

" Someone said," Miss Ospensky interjected, " that she is selling

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even that, but they say there will be some sort of arrangement made for her so that she can live there for the rest of her life."

Howard blustered, "The old fool in her senility has taken on all the airs of royalty. I've often thought that she owes a great deal of her reputed success as a hostess to her habit of giving expensive presents to eligible bachelors. No worry about extra men."

"Yes," Mrs. Porter said. "Always the same present, I understand. A gold cigarette-case."

"So vulgar!" Fira cried. "She always did go in for handsome young men of uncertain background. I never could see—"

There was a stony silence. Even Mr. Carol couldn't seem to think of an appropriate remark. He glared at Miss Ospensky.

"So I understand." Mrs. Porter turned to me and smiled. "My dear, you are an artist. The flowers have never looked better."

I murmured, "I'm afraid they—they are the work of Mr. Coles."

"Ah, I'm glad he helped you. The boy is obviously creative."

She looked at me inquiringly. For some insane reason I felt myself blushing. Nothing escaped Mr. Carol. His laugh was malicious. "History repeats itself," he said. "That boy seems to have an unholy effect on gullible young secretaries."

"I don't know what you mean," I said indignantly.

"Howard!" Mrs. Porter said sharply. She passed her hand before her eyes. Then she said quickly, "No more, please. We will discuss it no more! This Christmas must be the best we have ever known. There must be nothing to spoil it for Vance."

Mrs. Porter pushed back her chair. "We shall have a great deal to do tomorrow, Miss Stone. Will you be in my sitting-room at nine?" She said good night and left.

I climbed the marble stairs to my room and, with the door shut behind me, I breathed a sigh of relief.

I switched on the bedside lamp and wearily slipped out of my dress. I took it to the wardrobe and hung it up. Then, as I stood on tiptoe, I saw the hatbox on the high overhead shelf. It had been pushed back into the far corner. Recalling who had occupied this room last, I reached up almost without volition and dragged it down. Inside I found a cheap little red felt hat with a yellow feather stuck jauntily into its brim. It was new—there was a price tag still on it. I lifted the hat from its tissue-paper nest.

Underneath it, almost concealed by tissue-paper, was a large photograph, curled and brown with age. Slowly I put down the hat and lifted the photograph into the light. I stared into the face of a young girl in a bridal gown. Even in faded reproduction I was struck by the expression of ecstatic triumph in the girl's eyes. But I would never know whether or not the groom shared this almost unearthly happiness. Where his face had been, the photograph had been mutilated and slashed into a meaningless pulp.

The typewriter keys spat out dollars and cents as I drew up the Christmas cheques for Mrs. Porter to sign. She handed me a sheet

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of paper. I was astonished to read the memo at the bottom of it.

" Xmas cheque for Miss Fira Ospensky, $3,500."

" Perhaps I should explain," Mrs. Porter said. " Fira has no income of her own. In the past I've considered it more graceful to remedy the deficiency at Christmas. I have always felt that loyalty such as Fira's and Mr. Carol's cannot be bought . . . but when freely offered, one does one's best to reward it. It is the most important quality in the world to me.

" Poor Fira. Too much champagne and she's back on the stage of the Royal Opera House. She used to be a prima ballerina, you know. Howard holds his liquor better. He's had more practice." And then she said one of those things that reminded me that I could never be sure of anything about Mrs. Porter. " She told you about Mr. Porter and me? "

My embarrassment was ended by a sharp knock on the door.

" Come in." Bill Coles stepped into the room. In the atmosphere of Louis Quinze and brocaded silk he looked more untidy than ever. Really, I thought, he might have the manners to put on a coat when he comes into the house.

Mrs. Porter said, " Thank you for being so prompt, Bill. There are a few things that you can help me with today. I thought perhaps you would take over the decorations. Just the flower décor, of course. I thought poinsettias at the pillars in the ballroom. And I wanted to be sure that the tree would be set up in the drawing-room before noon tomorrow. And—oh yes—would you be so kind as to make up a corsage of white violets? "

" Is that all? "

His uncalled-for truculence in the face of Mrs. Porter's polite and kindly manner was infuriating.

" No," she said. " I just wanted you to know I am still very interested in your experiments."

He gave her a sharp, uncertain look. " I thought . . ."

" I know. But you're wrong, Bill. Miss Fain believed in you—And, Bill—I do hope this year will be good for you. I'm certain that it will be. You must not go on blaming yourself for that terrible tragedy . . ."

The look of pain that I had noticed before came back into his eyes. He muttered something I couldn't catch and went to the door. He turned back to me and with surprising diffidence asked, " We still have a date tonight? "

I opened my mouth to give him a vehement " no " when, to my astonishment, I saw Mrs. Porter, out of his line of vision, nodding her head.

Puzzled, I said, " I don't know. I'll call the greenhouse later."

" Sure." His voice was suddenly tired, " I understand."

When the door closed behind him Mrs. Porter said, " You must go, my dear. It might help him."

" Help? "

" To forget his morbid fancies about Miss Fain's death. He blames himself. It's true that she was infatuated with him and

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Howard stupidly told her Bill wasn't really interested. But it's not fair to blame him."

"Is that why she . . . ?"

"We found a note in her room. It simply read, 'I can't bear any more.' What else are we to think? If only I had had sense enough to explain to her about Bill in the beginning."

"Explain?"

"About his illness." The room was very quiet. I was aware of the faint scent of Mrs. Porter's perfume.

"On the afternoon it happened, she had some sort of silly quarrel with Howard Carol—I don't know what actually took place. But Howard apparently told her that Bill's emotions were not to be trusted—if indeed he had been emotional about her at all. You see, Bill is a war casualty. Nothing you would notice, of course, if you didn't understand."

"You mean his illness is mental?"

"Oh, nothing that is beyond repair. I am certain he's incapable of—well, an act of violence." Her voice faltered, and then she added, "He needs sympathy and understanding."

The anger I had felt for Bill Coles vanished. I was suddenly depressed. Something began to stir in me, something that had its roots in pity and yet went far beyond it.

"Do try to bring yourself to go with him. It is a good sign to find him interested in anyone."

"I see. Perhaps I will."

She smiled. "I can't tell you what confidence you give me, Miss Stone. I feel I can depend on you. These next few days are going to be difficult for me. I think you understand."

"Of course." I was wondering if she expected me to say more on the subject when suddenly she asked in a different voice, "Did you happen to come across a photograph in your room?"

Caught unawares, I stammered, "What kind of photograph?"

My surprise must have convinced her, for she went on to explain, "It was a photograph taken at my wedding. Miss Fain saw it once and asked for it—she was terribly romantic, you know. She wanted to show it to Bill Coles."

"Oh," I said faintly. Somehow I couldn't bring myself to tell her of the mutilated photograph that now lay in the bottom drawer of my bureau. It would be cruel to worry her . . .

"I'll look for it," I told her.

"Good." She smiled a little sadly and then said, "I think that will be all for this morning."

She's proud, I thought, proud and desperately lonely, and maybe waiting is the only reality she has known for forty years. It was incredible. But looking at her as she sat with the morning light touching her hair, I realized that Mrs. Porter was capable of just such unswerving loyalty. And as I went out into the hall, I thought: A woman's emotion is sometimes completely irrational. Even if the object of her love proves to be a liar, a traitor, a criminal, a—a psychopath, she will not take it back again.

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I went to the movies with Bill Coles, and when we came out the street had a late-night appearance, lonely and ill-lit. Bill Coles led me to his car, a coupé of ancient vintage that coughed and sputtered when he started the engine.

" Bessie is on her last legs," he said. " Tuck that blanket round your legs. The old girl has a heart of ice."

We drew away from the kerb and started down the main thoroughfare of the lower town, where seventeenth-century stone houses were crowded between ugly shops.

About halfway up the hill the narrow street opened into a tiny square. On the top side of the square was a lovely seventeenth-century clapboard house with a captain's walk on top. I noticed a plaque by the door.

" Smug and stubborn," he said. " And yet the lines are so clean. That house, I mean."

" It's lovely! "

" It belonged to my father once. He was a doctor. All the Coleses had been either doctors or lawyers until me. But my father couldn't cope with the age of steel. Tried to turn back the clock. Old debbil rum helped the illusion but ruined his usefulness in this century! Before I was born he had a decent practice, but people began to talk and patients fell off. After he lost the family house nothing ever went right for him again."

I was touched, certain that he didn't often talk so openly about himself. I was about to speak when he added, " I don't intend to be licked like my father. I know what I want and I'm going to get it."

" You mean your—experiments? "

" Right. Once I get set up in a laboratory . . ." He stopped and gave me a quick glance.

The mental road I had travelled for the past minutes suddenly changed in aspect from a smooth, pleasant surface to a rutted lane; up ahead were dark, unexplored turns. With difficulty I said, " Miss Fain—she wanted you to have that laboratory? "

" Sylvia? I suppose so," he said curtly. " Why do you ask? "

" I assumed from what Mrs. Porter said—and the others—" I stopped in confusion.

He was silent for a moment, then said, " I have a feeling you and I should stick together."

And before I thought, I said, " Is that what you told Miss Fain? "

The car lurched over to the side of the road.

" Thanks! " he said angrily.

Then I remembered what Mrs. Porter had told me about him. What a fool I had been to antagonize him. " Bill . . ."

The use of his first name startled us both. He turned and gave me an intense look while Bessie crept dutifully along the kerb.

" I really am sorry."

" I don't blame you," he said, after a minute. And then added, " After what happened—to Sylvia, I mean. I haven't found living with myself too easy."

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" Was she really in love with you? "

" She imagined it. I had no interest at all in her that way."

" When you told her, did she—I mean, was she terribly emotional about it? "

" That's the funny part. She didn't say much but there were no tears, no accusations. It wasn't until later in the afternoon."

" What happened? "

" She phoned me at the greenhouse at about six. She was very upset. I couldn't make head or tail of what she was saying. I told her to save it until I saw her again. It was that night that it happened. I never saw her again."

" And you feel if you had seen her—oh Bill, you mustn't brood about this. It wasn't your fault . . ." And then, because I couldn't bear the torture on his face, I said what had lain dormant in the back of my mind. " Suppose—suppose it wasn't suicide after all."

Bessie lurched and coughed. His hands went tight about the wheel. " What the deuce are you talking about? "

" You said yourself in the greenhouse this afternoon—well, you didn't exactly say it but when I asked about her death you answered ' suicide ' with a question in your voice."

" You're imagining things. You're as bad as she was! "

He swung the car out into the avenue and stepped on the gas. He seemed to have forgotten me. We reached the gates of Northview, turned up the drive, and came to a stop under the portico.

Bessie calmed down to a chug and we sat there saying nothing. I decided against mentioning the mutilated photograph.

After a moment he said, " This evening ended differently from what I had planned." There was something unaccountably gentle and sad in his voice.

" I enjoyed it very much," I said. He put his hand on my arm.

" Tell me something, Susan. Despite anything you may have heard about me, do you think you could trust me? "

" Why, what a funny question."

" I'm serious." I saw by his eyes that he was very serious indeed.

" Well? "

" Why yes," I said uncomfortably.

" Good. Then don't mention this crazy idea you have to anyone. Not until you've talked to me again."

" Then you think . . . ? " His hand tightened on my arm.

" I don't think anything yet. I want time. I'm going out to the greenhouse to work. I always think better that way." He suddenly smiled. " It's best not to talk about it."

" I had no intention of talking about it," I said.

" Good." His hand slid down my arm. " It's the darnedest thing . . ."

" What? "

" You," he said as his hand found mine. Quickly, and before he had time to say anything more, I drew away and got out of the car.

Breathlessly I said good night again and hurried up the steps. The hall was dimly lit, the rooms opening off it already dark, the

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blackness of the doorways as impenetrable as velvet. Everything seemed frozen in a chilled silence. I started up the stairs, still aware of the touch of Bill's hand on mine.

At the top of the stairs, I stopped, overcome suddenly with the unreasoning sensation that someone was watching me. Vance Porter watches everything here, I thought. The prickle of a chill crept up my legs. This is absurd, I told myself. I'm as bad as poor Sylvia Fain. Frightened.

I hurried through the silence towards my room. But with one hand on the knob I froze. A thin line of light fell on the carpet from beneath the door. I remembered distinctly turning off that light before I had gone out.

Quietly I turned the knob and pushed inward. In my direct line of vision stood a man holding aloft the gay little hat that Sylvia Fain had never worn; on the bed was the hatbox.

He turned and saw me. "This is awkward," he said coolly. "It would be very foolish of you to scream or make an unpleasant scene. Come in and shut the door behind you."

"Mr. Carol," I said, "what are you doing in my room?"

"A not unnatural question. However, there is no need to look like Venus outraged."

"You came for the photograph," I said bluntly.

He lost a little of his poise. "You have found it. What have you done with it?"

"Is that any of your business?"

"My dear young lady, that is what Miss Fain said—and you know what happened to her."

"Yes," I said distinctly, "she was murdered."

He looked at me speculatively. After a moment he said, "I would advise you not to allow that conjecture to travel any farther."

"I'm not interested in your advice! How did you know about that photograph and why do you want it?"

"I knew about it because on the afternoon Miss Fain died, I had a little chat with her here in this room. She was hysterical. She kept talking about a photograph, but the little fool refused to let me see it. Then after she died, I began to think." He stopped and shrugged. "I've searched this room at least five times. And then this evening I thought of the tissue at the bottom of the hatbox. I played a hunch. I was right, wasn't I? You have the photograph, and you're going to be a sensible girl and hand it over to me!"

"Please get out."

"I'm afraid," he said softly, "that is impossible until you give me the opportunity to explain why it is we, both of us—Fira and I—are a little distraught over the return of Vance Porter."

Curiosity overcame my nervousness. "You knew him?"

"Unfortunately, yes. In a way I'm responsible for everything." He walked to the window and stood there, his back to the room.

"It all seems a lifetime ago," he said. "I was in my last term at Oxford. Suddenly my father died, leaving me nothing but his very good name. The Carols stood for something at that time.

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When term ended, I went to Paris for one last glorious fling. Paris was very gay in those pre-war days. At a great ball in the palace of the Duchesse du Rocher I first met Vance Porter. He was incredibly handsome and dashing. No one knew much about him, but one look was enough for the ladies. He called himself the Honourable Vance Porter."

Howard Carol turned from the window, "What days those were! The 'twenties were a children's party beside those glittering, marvellous, and immoral times. I understood my period and predicament accurately. My name was not enough to assure success. I lacked, let us say, Vance's dynamic attraction. I analysed myself mercilessly and decided that my training and tastes had fitted me for one role only—that of the house guest. I saw at once that Vance would be an asset to my projected career in America. I asked him to New York and introduced him to the right people.

"My hunch was right. Invitations poured in. Mrs. Billings, then a leading society hostess, invited us both to Newport for the month of July. We accepted eagerly, I can assure you."

"It was that summer you met Mrs. Porter?"

"Marian Smith? At first we knew very little about her. The Smiths were a sort of joke, you see. Everyone laughed about Lucky Smith and his great new house, and how he had brought his daughter along with many, many millions to introduce to Newport society. No one came near them at first. But one day, Mrs. Billings, our hostess, decided to call. A sort of royal duty, you know, to look them over and make a report as to whether or not the girl was possible. Some say she took up Marian just to prove her power.

"After that, people came to the enormous dinner parties and balls that Lucky Smith staged. They may have laughed behind their fans but they were careful that Lucky Smith did not catch them at it."

"Did Mrs. Porter guess?"

"Even then, one didn't know what Marian thought, except once. That was the afternoon she first met Vance Porter at Mrs. Billings's house. She was like some unnatural plant that blooms only once in a lifetime. Of course by that time every impecunious bachelor in Newport was after the Smith millions. However, we all gave up when Vance took over. No one had a chance against him. The poor girl was a sitting duck before the onslaught of his charm."

"How did he feel about her?"

"My dear child! How do you think he felt about eighty million dollars?"

"You mean he wasn't in love with her at all?"

"It didn't occur to me to ask. I was, frankly, more interested in whether he was prepared to remember how useful I had been in the affair—again I should have known him better. Papa Smith was very cool about the whole romance at first. It was Mrs. Billings, playing Cupid, who made the great mistake. She assured

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Lucky Smith that Vance came of a very good English family." He laughed.

"Wasn't it true?"

"True! He was the son of a cockney racing tout! But before that—and much worse—came out, the ceremony had taken place. It was a wedding to end all weddings. Directly after the ball which followed the ceremony, Marian and her groom left for the west coast where they were to be met by Lucky's yacht. Unfortunately there was never to be a South Sea honeymoon for dear Marian. The groom was snatched off the train in Kansas City by federal agents and extradited to England. It seems that the not-so-Honourable Vance Porter had been, among other things, a jewel thief. At a charity ball in London he had been caught in the act by a butler. The butler had been silenced permanently with the butt of a gun. But the maid had caught a glimpse of Vance as he fled from the bedroom. He was convicted, and sent away for life. Marian never stopped working to have him freed. She never believed he did it. Finally, after forty years—"

"And she never saw him?"

"Vance wouldn't allow her to visit him in gaol. He was too proud. Proud! Heaven help us! Well, you can imagine what a field day it was for the yellow press. They had been waiting for a long time to take Lucky Smith for a ride. They were merciless. They made both father and daughter the prize fools of the century. And Mrs. Billings set the tone for Newport by implying that she had realized all along that Vance was an impostor. You cannot wonder that Marian hates Mrs. Billings.

"Marian stayed away from Newport until her father's death. Then she came back here and shut her gates to Newport and the rest of the world."

"How could she have come back?"

"She isn't Lucky Smith's daughter for nothing. He had built Northview for her to live in, and she was going to live in it."

"She has courage," I said. "And she is pitiful!"

He said nothing. After a moment he turned. "But surely," he said, "you can see the whole thing is unhealthy."

"I can think of other attitudes around this house that are even more unhealthy!"

"Don't you understand?" His voice rose sharply. "Are you too stupid to see what sort of a person Vance Porter is and that he'll spoil things for all of us?"

"I can't say that I blame him!"

"Miss Stone! I have put up with enough for the past fifteen years—too much to have it all destroyed in one day. You would be much wiser to stick with Miss Ospensky and me."

Quietly I said, "I think you're despicable. Now will you leave?"

He crushed out his cigarette and stood there looking at me, and suddenly I didn't like the expression on his face.

"I want that photograph," he said.

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There was a moment's silence. When I didn't reply he took a step towards me. "Miss Fain refused to give it to me." His face was deadly serious. I noticed his hands were clenched.

As he took another step, the phone rang twice, shrilly. I snatched it up.

"Susan?"

"Bill!" I cried breathlessly.

Mr. Carol whispered, "You little fool! You're playing his game! You'll regret it."

"Susan, is anything wrong?"

"Wrong? Not now," I said, watching Mr. Carol's indignant exit from the room.

"I saw your light still on. I'd like to talk to you. It's serious. Could you come out to the greenhouse? I'll meet you halfway up the drive."

I hung up. My heart was pounding wildly.

Quickly I went to the bureau, opened the bottom drawer, and took out the photograph. It was already ruined; folding it would not matter now. Half size, it slid easily into the big patch-pocket of my coat.

The gravel whispered under my feet as I hurried towards the greenhouse. The wind had risen and was moaning in from the sea. A sliver of moon, fugitive, guilty, appeared for a moment from behind the veil of clouds and then was gone. I was aware of the dark and watching windows of Northview behind me. In the depths of the garden a shadow moved. I stopped. The shadow detached itself from a boxwood hedge and said, "Susan!"

"Bill." I went to him. We stood very close in the darkness. "Bill, there is some dreadful thing about that house—some secret—"

He reached out and gently took my hand. "Take it easy, Susan." He led me down through the garden, and then off to the left instead of straight ahead towards the dim light of the greenhouse.

"Where are we going?"

"Afraid?"

"Not now." I told myself there was nothing to be afraid of.

"Sylvia was always afraid."

"That's what Mrs. Porter said. But of what?"

"Of Miss Ospensky, of Howard Carol, of the things no one ever said."

The moon had gone. We moved through darkness.

"Bill, why did you telephone?"

"I'd been thinking about what you said. I'm worried. I want you to forget it." Something loomed up in the darkness. I made out the railings and columns of a rustic summer-house.

"We can talk here," he said. He stepped aside and I went into the summer-house.

I went to the far rail and said over my shoulder, "Howard Carol was in my room when I got back—searching for something."

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I looked down over the railing. A thin snakelike line moved back and forth where the ground should have been. And there was a rhythmical sort of hissing sound. Strange.

" Searching for something? " Bill's voice seemed to come from a great distance.

" A photograph," I said. I put my hand in my pocket and felt it.

What in the world was that wavering white line below me? I felt all my fears returning. I couldn't make out the contours of the ground down there below the rail . . .

When Bill finally spoke he was very close, right behind me. " Did Howard Carol find the photograph? "

" No."

" Have you any idea where it could be? "

I drew a deep breath. " No," I said faintly.

His hands were on my shoulders. Very tight. He turned me about. Although his grasp was unnecessarily rough, the expression on his face was gentle, almost sad.

" I didn't tell you this before," he said carefully. " When I spoke to Sylvia on the phone that afternoon she said something about a photograph. She seemed hysterical. She wanted me to see it. I told her—" He stopped.

" Told her what, Bill? "

" To leave well alone." A gust of cold wind whipped around my legs. His grip on my shoulders was very tight.

" I brought you here to try to make you understand," he said. " It was from this summer-house that Sylvia fell to her death. Behind you, beyond that rail, is a drop of a hundred and fifty feet to the rocks and the surf."

A numbness crept up my arms. No, I thought, no. Oh dear heaven, no.

His voice was still very calm, still almost unnaturally controlled. " She meddled in things she didn't understand. She died."

" Bill," I whispered, " you're hurting me, please."

" When Vance Porter returns, something terrible will happen at Northview. I wouldn't want it to happen to you, Susan—not to you."

" Bill . . ."

" Look for that photograph for me. Look everywhere. If you find it, give it to me in the morning. Then I want you to leave Northview and never go back."

My mouth was dry. I couldn't reply. His voice suddenly was harsh. " Do you understand? "

And then I sagged up against him. His hands left my shoulder, encircled me, drew me close. I looked up into his face, drawn and tense with some emotion I couldn't understand. His lips found mine. I drew closer, responded to his kiss with a passion beyond my comprehension.

We fell apart. For a moment neither of us spoke a word, then he said, " Well? "

" I don't know," I said. " I don't know! "

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Far below, the hiss of the surf played a counterpart to the sound of the wind moaning through the summer-house.

" You'd better go! " he said roughly. He stepped aside and I went past him out of the summer-house to the darkness of the lawn.

I fled across the smooth lawn, up through the waving shadows of the garden towards the house. Had Sylvia Fain ever trod this same path, running breathlessly through the night from the memory of a kiss?

I let myself into the hall. Light was streaming from a doorway. I went to it like a moth to a flame. Beyond the doorway was the ballroom, white and gold, lit by three blazing chandeliers hung in a painted ceiling. Standing in the centre of the ballroom was Mrs. Porter. She stood, lost in thought, gazing at the far end of the room. I cleared my throat and she turned.

" Oh," she said, " I'm so relieved. I went to your room. When I found you weren't in I couldn't sleep. I thought I had made a dreadful mistake in allowing you to go out with that young man. There is something I should have told you. I haven't told anyone. It probably doesn't mean a thing, yet . . ." She sighed. I waited, feeling that I would rather not hear what she was about to say. I wondered whether she had been thinking of the man whose dark shadow hung over this house, remembering perhaps when she had last danced with him in this very room.

" You see, my dear, on the afternoon Miss Fain died she made an engagement with Bill Coles."

I reached for the support of the door frame. I felt suddenly terribly weak and tired. " Engagement? "

" He asked her to meet him that evening at ten o'clock. In the summer-house." Her eyes turned to me, full of pity.

I spent the morning shopping for Mrs. Porter, and in the afternoon I took her gifts to the drawing-room. There was a slight sound somewhere in the room behind me. I turned to find Mrs. Porter. She stood watching me, her hands folded across two white envelopes. I felt a sudden stab of pity. I thought: She carries cheques about with her as a refugee might carry identity papers, as though she fears she might not be welcome anywhere without them. The expression of concealed excitement on her face touched me. Oh God, I prayed, please don't let Vance spoil her dream, don't let him disappoint her.

If ever I was to mention the photograph and Howard Carol's presence in my room on the previous night, now was the time. It was up to Mrs. Porter to decide whether or not the police should be called in and the case of Sylvia Fain's death reopened. But, looking at her face, I couldn't bring myself to speak. Not today of all days, I thought.

" My dear, you don't look at all well. Has someone upset you? "

" Oh no."

" Bill Coles? " I didn't answer. I felt as though I were under an X-ray. The intensity of her interest was surprising.

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" My dear child! " she said, " you can't be foolish enough to— It's impossible after such a short time—I didn't dream you were the sort who—"

" I don't know what you mean." But even as she spoke, I thought, I love him.

Mrs. Porter turned and went to the window, giving me time to develop the unwelcome thought. It's mad, I thought, you can't be in love with a man who is mentally disturbed and unstable. It was as irrational as her obsession with Vance Porter. Just then Mrs. Porter turned. Her expression was very grave. " I know," she said quietly. " I could give you some advice. You wouldn't listen. Miss Fain wouldn't listen, either."

" How ill is he? "

" What can I say? "

I fought the idea. " I can't believe it. He seems so strong and sure of himself . . . there's nothing about him, except—"

" Yes? "

" Mrs. Porter, last night you said you were worried about my being out with him. You said that Miss Fain—Surely you don't think—? "

She turned from me to the window. Over her shoulder she said, " Miss Fain committed suicide."

" Mrs. Porter. I know this. I know that he could not have— I know that he could not kill anyone—I know—"

" How do you know? "

" It's something I can't explain. I just know. If you think you are protecting him, that he might have done it in a moment of mental aberration, it isn't true. I know! " She said nothing.

" He will be all right," I continued wildly. " Perhaps if he had a chance to develop his experimental ideas he might—"

" Ah! " I stopped, horrified at the inference she might draw from my words. She turned and said, unsmiling, " I see."

" He didn't ask me to say anything. Really, Mrs. Porter, I don't know why I should have said it."

" It's quite all right, my dear," she said calmly. Her eyes went to the two white envelopes. " You can tell Bill Coles that I have decided to finance anything that may be necessary for his work. A laboratory—"

" But, Mrs. Porter, I didn't mean—It has nothing to do with me."

" On the contrary, it has everything to do with you. You must let him know before he leaves this evening. Perhaps then he will not feel so much resentment against me. And he will know, of course, that you have had something to do with my decision."

" Mrs. Porter, I—I want you to know that I think you have tremendous courage and kindness."

" Do you? " she interrupted me, and for the first time her voice was actually cold. Carefully she said, " Miss Stone, I have waited forty years for this evening. The results will not be different in any manner from what I expect."

She looked up at the portrait of her father, and the odd, flat note

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of certainty in her voice made me think suddenly: It comes from him—that unswerving dedication to one purpose, the quality of steel.

Before she could say more, Fira Ospensky and Howard Carol came into the room.

"Marian dear!" Miss Ospensky's Russian accent was even thicker than usual, oozing out like dark syrup. "Howard took me for some last-minute shopping." It was obvious that she had been drinking. I noticed, too, that his colour was even higher than usual.

"Nothing in the shops but gadgets this year." The telltale signs in his voice were hardly noticeable. I remembered Mrs. Porter having said, he holds his liquor better than Fira, he's had more practice.

Suddenly, he stumbled against a rug, started to lose his balance, recovered, and jerked to his feet. But in doing so, something fell from his pocket, something new and shiny. It spun about on the thick rug and came to rest at Mrs. Porter's feet.

I couldn't understand the breathless silence. All three were staring at the object as though hypnotized. Despair shone from Howard Carol's eyes.

"So," Mrs. Porter said quietly, "she still gives gold cigarette-cases to her favourite bachelors!" Then I remembered the story of Mrs. Billings's gifts, and my sympathies went out to Mrs. Porter. Whatever her reasons, it was quite plain that, in a sense, Howard Carol was involved in an act of personal treason.

She sighed and looked at Miss Ospensky. "And you, Fira?"

Miss Ospensky choked off a nervous laugh.

"I'd like to see it, Fira. I'm quite serious."

Miss Ospensky, who recognized the command in the quiet voice, fought for time by clasping and unclasping her handbag.

"Fira!" Like a child surrendering to an irate parent, Miss Ospensky slowly handed over an envelope. Mrs. Porter opened it, and took out a cheque.

"You couldn't have known it would be so small, could you, Fira?" she said, handing it back. In her voice was a reluctant note of pity. "Pick up your cigarette-case, Howard. It's very pretty. And it's gold."

"We ran into her when we were shopping, Marian. She insisted that we should go back with her for a Christmas drink. Naturally, we should not have done so if she had not told us she was dining here tonight."

"I wanted it to be a surprise for you."

Mrs. Porter seemed to be thinking about something else. "The hairdresser is waiting for me," she said quietly. "We will meet here by the Christmas-tree at seven-thirty." She left the room, taking her two white envelopes away with her. I was ashamed to witness the naked desperation in the faces of Fira and Howard.

"The envelopes," Fira Ospensky said. "They must have been our Christmas cheques. She's going to change them."

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Howard turned to her. All the wordly cynicism was gone from his face. Very quietly he murmured, "I think you're right, Fira," as he walked blindly from the room.

To my surprise, I realized that Miss Ospensky was in tears. "Poor Howard," she sobbed, "poor Howard! I will dress, and tonight I will drink too much champagne, and I shall look into Howard's eyes and I shall wish to kill her."

"Miss Ospensky!"

"You are shocked? You have not been cornered yet, my dear child. Life has barely touched you. When it gets its cold cruel fingers on your throat—then you will know!"

Fortunately, Perkins came to my rescue. "The musicians are here, miss."

"Thank you, Perkins." Three men awaited me in the hall, their instruments in worn black cases. I took them to the ballroom which was ablaze with light. Miss Ospensky followed. Poinsettias were wound about the pillars supporting the galleries on either side of the room. I showed them to the white-and-gold concert grand piano at the far end, and explained their duties.

"You mean there will be no dancing?" their spokesman asked.

"Mrs. Porter wants you to play during dinner. The dining-room adjoins, and the doors will be left open. She particularly wants the waltzes of Strauss and Lehar, and I think you have already been instructed to bring the music for the Hungarian waltz called *White Violets*."

The musicians consulted among themselves. The violin strings squeaked sadly as they tuned up. Then, softly and surprisingly well, they began to play a lilting little waltz.

Miss Ospensky gasped. "How very strange. They are playing Vance's song!"

"Mr. Porter wrote it?"

"No, but he introduced it to Newport. That summer everyone danced to it. The last time I heard *White Violets* was here in this very room on the night of the wedding." She tilted her head back and half shut her eyes. "That night! I will never forget it! I danced in the pas de deux from *Sleeping Beauty*."

Sleeping Beauty—the Princess who had waited so long for the kiss of the absent Prince.

"All about this room were women in lovely gowns and dazzling jewels. It was like floating away on a moonlit sea, and when we were finished—the ovation! And that waltz. I can never forget it! Everyone associated it with Vance Porter, and his bride wore the white violets he had given her on her gown. Oh, that man was handsome. Every women in Newport was in love with him. He was so gay and ironical. There was always a joke in his eyes. Life and women seemed to have been created for him! She moved across the floor in his arms as though she were mesmerized. The way she looked up into his face—it was almost embarrassing! For all the world to see. Not just something polite and pretty, but passionate love of the kind some women never know, and even

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then—only once! And all the time the orchestra played that waltz!"

I had the sudden eerie sensation that Vance Porter haunted this room, and something like a mocking laugh seemed to rise with the sweep of the waltz.

"I remember it all so clearly," Miss Ospensky went on. "I remember Lucky Smith standing at the foot of the stairs watching the dancers. The man made me shudder. His eyes were cold as ice. I could understand then the stories of the way he had treated his poor wife.

"She was taken away when Marian was five. She lived for fifteen years in a private sanatorium. I have heard that she was a pathetic, frightened creature, considered by Lucky to be a social liability. She was supposed to have suffered from some mental illness but I have always thought it was a subterfuge to get rid of her! It was not his wife who should have been in a mental institution but Lucky Smith himself! The man was inhuman!"

The music climbed to a crescendo. A voice behind me said, "Miss Stone."

I turned to find Perkins. "What is it?"

"It's about Mr. Porter, miss." Something cold seemed to touch my heart.

"Well?"

"There has been an accident on the railway."

No, I thought. No, not after all these years!

"Nothing serious, miss, it was the train ahead of the one he was on that had trouble. The line is jammed up from New London to Providence. There won't be a train through until almost eleven."

"I suppose that will change the dinner plans, Perkins."

"No. Mrs. Porter asked me to inform you that she wished everything to be as arranged." He left the room.

Miss Ospensky watched me with a birdlike intensity. "It gives us a reprieve, eh?" she said in an excited whisper. "Still a few hours more." The waltz soared to a close. In the sudden silence the musicians put down their instruments. Without a word I walked away from Miss Ospensky and went to my room. I thought: It's all a dream, a nightmare, and I can't seem to climb up out of it.

In my room the house phone was ringing.

"Where the devil have you been? I've been trying to get you all day!" Bill's voice was tense and angry.

"I've been dealing with her Christmas presents," I said shortly. "She's going to give you the laboratory for a Christmas present."

After a moment, he said, "You don't really think I'd take it from her!"

"Bill, why didn't you tell me that you had a date to meet Sylvia Fain in the summer-house that night?"

There was a sound like a gasp. For a moment I thought he had hung up.

"It's true, then?" He didn't answer.

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When he spoke, his voice sounded tired and far away. " She asked me to meet her in the summer-house at eight. I had an errand to do downtown. I didn't get back until eight-thirty. I waited out there for a long time. When she didn't show up I supposed she had changed her mind. It happened before I got back. If I had not been late—" He paused. " Who told you that? "

" Mrs. Porter."

" Susan! " His voice rose sharply.

" Yes? "

" I want you to leave that house. Now." The phone went dead.

I hung up and thought, maybe I was a fool not to have given him the photograph. And then I noticed that my bed had been disarranged. Without turning back the sheets, I knew that the photograph, which I had hidden under the mattress, would be gone.

The music of *White Violets* was muted and unreal, a calliope out of a dream, drifting in from the ballroom to the candle-lit table where old hands, jewelled and manicured, moved from crystal to silver. White violets, as lifeless as wax, nestled in the silver bowl, and white violets clung to Mrs. Porter's elegant white dinner-gown. She sat at the head of the table opposite the empty chair of the man she awaited, and it seemed as though she had rediscovered some forgotten part of her youth. The ordinarily flat white texture of her hair had taken on a soft and misty quality; lipstick, discreetly applied, had the effect of bringing out the smooth and delicate skin. There was something tremulous and youthful in her anticipation, yet I thought I detected, beneath the controlled, gentle gaiety, a note of hysteria, and time and again her eyes were turned to the empty chair.

Vance Porter was as much a presence at this party as though he had been there in person. Mrs. Billings, who sat at the right of the empty chair, seemed aware of this, and at times, it seemed to me in my slightly befuddled state, that she directed her conversation towards that chair.

There wasn't the slightest hint in Mrs. Billings's manner that she had not seen her hostess for forty years. To my surprise, Mrs. Porter played the game the others were playing; to a casual observer this might have been a gathering of old and very close friends. I knew better. I felt the tension drawing tight about the table.

Mrs. Billings was saying, " We must all of us take up where we left off. My friends have been made cognizant of the fact that I intend to stand behind you and Vance, my dear Marian."

Mrs. Billings cast a furtive glance at the empty chair. There was an uncomfortable silence. Then she said, " There is, after all, a small, but very precious future."

Howard was looking across the candlelight at Fira Ospensky, and for a moment they were locked together by a look so intense that it made me uncomfortable.

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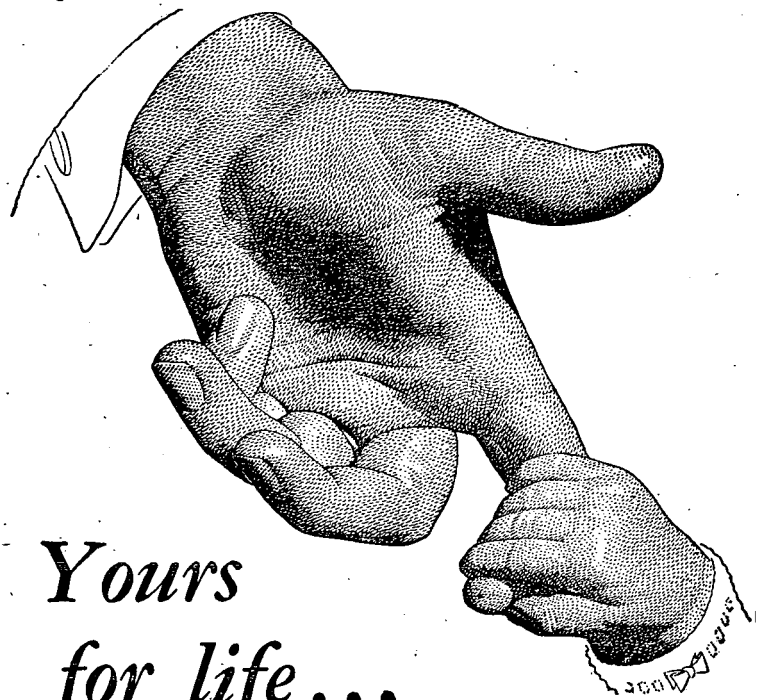

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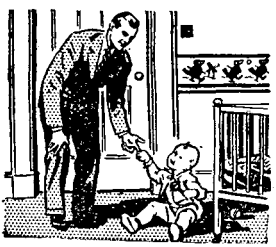

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"I used to say," Mrs. Billings added, "that I would die at the head of my table in my precious Headlands at a party for twenty of the most charming people in the world. I no longer know twenty people who would fit that category. But there are still a few, and you will find them next summer at Headlands—"

"Then the rumour that you have sold Headlands isn't true?"

"I'm afraid it is. But I have made a very convenient arrangement. The Company that bought it is going to allow me to live there for the rest of my life. Of course, I never would have parted with it in any other circumstances. I cannot visualize life without Headlands." Again she darted a nervous look towards the empty chair. That chair seemed possessed of an evil, commanding life of its own.

Howard had lapsed into a moody silence, and he watched me with something that might have been hatred. Once, he raised his glass, and said in the midst of the conversation, "To the desperation of love!"

Mrs. Porter turned to me and said, "Oh, Miss Stone, this afternoon I had a most unpleasant scene with Bill Coles in the greenhouse. He has some absurd idea about me. He seemed to think that someone wished to murder me."

Everybody stopped talking. Dimly I was aware that they were all watching Mrs. Porter. They were waiting for me to say something. I was too shocked to reply.

Mrs. Porter said, "From the violence of his manner, I could only conclude that it must be wish fulfilment. I'm afraid his condition is quite serious. I suggested medical attention. He is leaving us." She was watching me closely.

A clock began to chime nine. I looked apprehensively towards the empty chair. The unseen host seemed to be drawing us all tighter into a sinister web. Everything was waiting for the moment of his arrival. I touched my empty champagne glass. My head felt light. The white violets were suddenly hideous. I was overcome by a sense of overpowering fear. Bill is right, I thought, something terrible is going on that we do not understand. Miss Fain was murdered because she knew what it was. And I had behaved in almost every detail as had Miss Fain.

Perkins bent over my shoulder to refill my glass. I reached for it and took a gulp of champagne. She was frightened, they said. Always frightened. The music of the orchestra seemed to fade and rise. Suddenly there was a silence and they were all looking at me.

They were rising from the table now. I took a firm hold of myself and stood up. I was aware of Howard Carol close to Miss Ospensky, and Mrs. Billings, cool and regal, walking next to Mrs. Porter. The drawing-room was stifling. The tree glittered.

I realized that they were all staring at me, apparently awaiting a reply to some question.

"My dear," Mrs. Porter said, "we have decided to open the presents. Will you please hand Miss Ospensky and Mr. Carol

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their gifts?" There was a new note in her voice, the echo of controlled excitement. Nervously, I took the white envelopes and, averting my gaze, handed them to Howard and Fira.

With shaking fingers, Miss Ospensky opened hers and drew out the cheque. She stared at it, then looked quickly at Howard. Even before he opened his he had read the message in her eyes.

"I know that fifty dollars isn't much," Mrs. Porter said softly, "but I think it is better that you begin your new life without any sense of deep obligation. You seem disappointed."

Howard said in a high, unnatural voice, "New life?"

"I think it highly advisable for you both to—shall we say—legalize your—liaison. You long ago divested yourselves of any loyalty to me—if you ever had any."

Howard moved close to Miss Ospensky. Very quietly he said, "You neither expected nor wanted our loyalty, Marian. You wanted something else. You wanted to corrupt and destroy us. You haven't succeeded."

"Howard!" Fira reached out and clutched his arm. Quickly she spoke, "We will leave in the morning, Marian."

"Yes," Mrs. Porter said. "You planned to leave anyway—after you got your Christmas cheques. You were afraid of Vance."

Howard was trembling with rage but he controlled himself and started for the hall with Miss Ospensky. Suddenly the old ballerina turned. There was something in her face I had never before seen. Something that, oddly enough, suggested dignity and repose.

"I love Howard," she said. "He loves me. It is ridiculous. But I do not love a ghost. We knew you would destroy us if—"

Mrs. Porter said, "You have laughed at me for what you have called a romantic obsession. Surely now you cannot object to the realism you have found so admirable."

Miss Ospensky's hand found his. "Come, Howard," she said gently. "This is what we should have done years ago." And they left the room.

Calmly Mrs. Porter said, "Miss Stone, will you please give Mrs. Billings her present?" Her voice was like steel.

With trembling fingers, I handed a large envelope to Mrs. Billings. She drew out a letter. She read it, reread it, looked up with blank faded eyes. "This does not make sense."

Mrs. Porter said nothing. Mrs. Billings turned to me as though I might be able to explain. "I don't understand," she said. "It's a letter giving me permission to remain at Headlands until February. It's signed by Marian Porter."

Mrs. Billings laughed sharply. "What sort of a joke is this, Marian? The people to whom I sold Headlands have given me their word they would allow me to remain there for the rest of my life. They represent the best realty company in Boston."

"And that realty company, Mrs. Billings, represents me."

The old woman stared at Mrs. Porter unbelievingly.

"But Headlands is my life!"

"I think I am being quite generous in allowing you to remain

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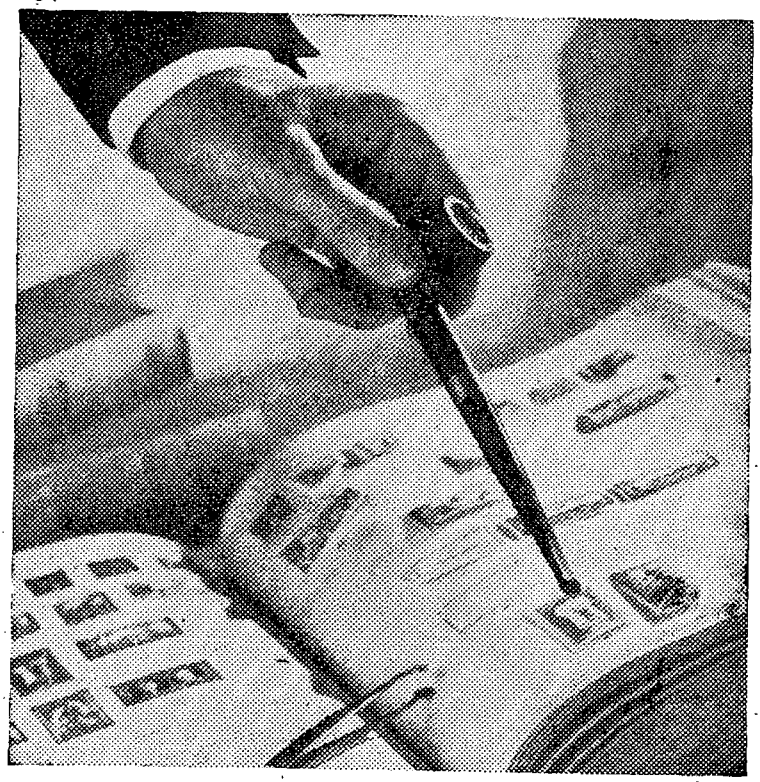

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another few weeks. I plan to turn Headlands into a home."

"You have been planning this all these years as your revenge for some silly remarks I may have made forty years ago. You can't be so inhuman!"

"Inhuman? *I* once thought people couldn't be so inhuman. They were. Now you make the same discovery!"

Appalled, I watched Mrs. Billings as she struggled for words. She seemed to shrink before my eyes into a beaten old woman.

"Miss Stone,"—Mrs. Porter's voice was completely without emotion—"ask Perkins to call Mrs. Billings's car."

I fled from the room, found Perkins, and gave him the instruction. Mrs. Billings came out into the hall like a sleepwalker. She looked at me as though she had never seen me before, then she walked slowly across the great hall and out to her car. I went back to the drawing-room. Mrs. Porter was standing beneath the portrait of her father. "You are shocked, Miss Stone?"

My head ached. So Vance Porter had reached out across the years to create this cruelty and evil. She was thinking of no one but Vance. She wanted no one but Vance.

"Yesterday I told you that the quality I admired most in people was loyalty. I neglected to add that it does not exist! At first I thought you had sense. When you began to blubber about that Coles boy I realized my mistake. You disgust me, Miss Stone! Perkins has a cheque for you. You will leave in the morning." A slap in the face would have had less effect. Her small hands were clasped tight before her. "I don't need any of you now," she said. "I shall wait here for him—alone."

I turned and ran blindly to my room.

Once inside, I locked the door behind me, and dialled the greenhouse. I heard the instrument buzzing at the other end. It went on and on, a lonely, hopeless sound. I hung up and threw myself face down on the bed. I was too frightened to weep. I knew that somewhere out there in the darkness a man was nearing the end of a journey that had lasted forty years.

I awoke from a nightmare, and someone started to laugh, a dreadful, bitter laugh, full of hate and anguish, and then there was a scream. The sound of the scream lingered in my ears. The room was very still and dark. I had no idea how long I had slept. I had dozed off fully dressed.

Still caught in the terror of the dream, still only half awake, I went to the door, unlocked it, and stepped out into the hall. One dim light burnt on the landing at the top of the marble steps, but at the other end of the hall, light streamed across the carpet from a half-opened door—the door of Mrs. Porter's sitting-room. There was something wrong, but my mind wouldn't work.

I hesitated a moment, afraid to look behind me. Someone was back there by the stairs, watching me. Without turning, I knew it. I had no control over my movements. I started down the hall, past the statue. I stepped into the patch of yellow light. No

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sound came from the sitting-room. Somewhere in the house I heard the faint click of a door being carefully closed. I shivered. I leaned forward, put my palm on the door panel, and pushed. The door swung inward.

Mrs. Porter lay across the chaise-longue, still wearing the white evening gown. It's all right, I thought, she's just fallen asleep. It's all right. But no, she wasn't asleep. Her eyes were open and she was looking directly at me. Her head was tilted to one side at an unnatural angle. She looks like a bride, I thought wildly.

" Mrs. Porter," I whispered. She didn't answer. Even before I spoke I knew she would never answer. Her eyes were fixed not on me, but beyond me, and in them was no longer the look of waiting. In death she appeared to be remarkably young. Why, I thought, she has the body of a young girl.

Of course, I told myself, I'm still dreaming. I'll wake up.

But the sight of the overturned chair had the effect the sight of the body had failed to evoke. I stepped back into the hall. Someone was moving down at the other end. I thought: I must get into my room and lock the door and call for help. Call Bill. I fled past the statue to my room. I threw open the door. The lights had been turned on. Howard Carol was standing there.

I stumbled away towards the stairs. After an eternity I finally managed to slip the bolt of the front door, and then I was outside in the cold night, running, running. I came up against the door of the greenhouse, snatched it open, and fell inside. A dim light burnt over the desk, but no one was in sight.

And in that moment I saw the white violets, hundreds of them, strewn and trampled over the earthen floor. I stared stupidly, and then with a terrible sudden calm, I thought: Whoever did this is mad. Whoever did this killed Miss Fain and Mrs. Porter.

Deep down in the greenhouse, a shadow moved. A voice said, " Who is it? "

Bill. He had been here all the time.

I couldn't move for a moment. Horror, like ice, had taken possession of me. He was ill. Dangerously ill. Someone will try to kill Mrs. Porter, he had said. He knew. He knew because ...

He came out of the darkness. I saw his hands first, strong and purposeful.

" Susan."

I thought: I don't want to die. And the thought jerked me to life. I swung about and went out into the darkness. A kind of crafty desperation had taken possession of me. I mustn't go back up the drive, I thought, that's what he will expect. I cut out across the white lawn into the deeper darkness. But I hadn't gone ten yards when I realized my fatal mistake. I had only cut myself off from the house and safety. He was coming behind me, coming fast.

I lost all reason. I ran on blindly, on and on. I could hear him breathing hard behind me. I started screaming then, running, arms out wildly, screaming. Up ahead there was nothing but blackness. I had to reach that blackness; maybe I could lose

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myself in it. It was only a few yards away. And then some remnant of sanity warned me. I was nearly at the edge of the cliff.

To my right was the sinister shadow of the summer-house. I tried to dart off to the right, but he was upon me. I struggled. He seemed to be pushing me towards the edge of the cliff. He didn't say a word. I couldn't fight him any more. His hands were digging into my back. And then, in the last moment of consciousness, I realized that he was pulling me to him, away from the cliff, away from that terrible darkness.

Out of another darkness he was saying over and over again, "Darling. Susan, darling . . ." I opened my eyes. His face was very close. Above it were the squares of greenhouse glass, black with night. He tipped a cup of water towards my mouth, and said something gentle.

I pushed his hand away. "You were ill," I sobbed.

"Ill?" he said sharply. "What do you mean—ill?"

"It's all right. It's going to be all right, Bill. Don't worry."

"Answer me, Susan." He shook me gently. "What are you talking about?"

"Mrs. Porter," I whispered. "Mrs. Porter explained about your breakdown." His face moved up and away from me.

"I might have guessed," he said quietly. "It explains a lot of things." He put a finger under my chin and tilted my head up until my eyes met his. "Look at me, Susan. Do I seem mentally ill? Do you really believe that I am?"

"Oh my dearest, I don't know what to believe any more."

"Look around you!" he said almost harshly.

Again I saw the violets, mutilated, ground underfoot into the earth. I shivered.

"She came down here before dinner to fire me. She was quiet, and ostensibly under control, but the hysteria was in her eyes."

"Mrs. Porter?" I whispered.

"I'd suspected, of course; I knew she couldn't be normal and live the way she did . . ." Suddenly the cold seemed to cut into my heart, and I began to tremble.

"She's dead," I said in a voice that did not sound like my own.

His hands closed about my shoulders. "Susan, pull yourself together. What the devil are you saying?"

Mechanically, I said, "Mrs. Porter is dead. She's lying up there in her sitting-room. She's been murdered."

He put his arms around me. His voice was so calm, so steadying, that some of my fear ebbed away. I told him everything.

"She cared about no one but Vance," I finished. "No one else mattered to her. It's all so strange, particularly why she told me that you were—were—"

"That's a well-known act of a psychopath—to imply that those around them are abnormal. Also, she wanted to keep us apart. And she almost succeeded, didn't she? She hated anyone to be happy. I saw that long ago. I imagine Howard and Fira did, too. I used to think it was just jealousy, but in time I realized it went

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much deeper than that. I tried to make Sylvia see what she was, but Sylvia worshipped Mrs. Porter until—" He shook his head, and the look of pain flickered across his face.

"What about Sylvia Fain?" I asked.

"I think," he said in a strained voice, "that Mrs. Porter must have killed her."

"Oh no!"

"I don't know *why*, Susan!" He pounded his fist into the palm of his hand. "It would all hang together if only I knew why. At first I thought Mrs. Porter must have done or said something to drive Sylvia to kill herself—and I felt maybe I was partly to blame, too. Tonight you changed all that when you said on the phone that Mrs. Porter told you about my date with Sylvia. No one could have known that. Mrs. Porter must have been listening in on the house phone when Sylvia spoke to me. A few minutes later, Mrs. Porter sent me out on an errand. She knew I could never be back by eight, but she ran it pretty close. At eight-thirty I got back, and Sylvia wasn't there."

"But why would she do a thing like that—even being—deranged?"

"I don't know," he said again. "On the phone, Sylvia babbled about that photograph, and about Mrs. Porter stabbing someone with a paper-knife."

"The photograph!" I cried. I looked at Bill pleadingly. "Oh my dear, try to understand. I found it and I was afraid to give it to you. It was Mrs. Porter's wedding picture—only the groom's face was all slashed and torn."

For a moment, Bill stared at me, and then he said softly, "So that's it! Don't you see, darling? Don't you understand? Why," there was wonder in his voice, "she must have been planning this evening for forty years. Waiting for him to come just to get even. Then Sylvia found her stabbing at his photograph, and realized Mrs. Porter was something she hadn't suspected. That the so-called romance was nothing of the sort. She could have ruined all Mrs. Porter's plans at the last minute."

"But she didn't," I said. "Look how it ended." But even as I spoke the words, I had a feeling the end had not yet come.

Bill took my by the arm. "Come along," he said, "we must go back to the house."

The doorway leading into the ballroom was dark. Howard moved slowly towards it.

Fira cried, "Howard, be careful. The police will be here. Wait!" Howard reached the threshold, stepped inside, and a moment later the chandeliers of the ballroom glittered like ice. Far down the room, sitting listlessly before the white piano, was a man who turned and looked at us all almost indifferently.

No, I thought. No. This can't be Vance Porter, whose charm was legendary, whose magnetism had ruled and ruined the life of the woman who lay dead in the green-and-gold sitting-room. I

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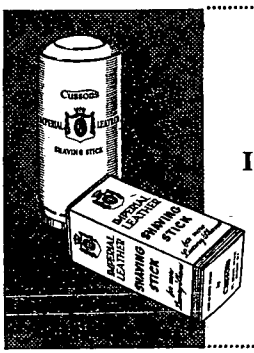

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saw a shrivelled old man, whose face was drawn, whose hand on the piano keys shook, whose eyes reflected a senile craftiness.

"Who're you?" he said to Howard. Then a little spark of remembrance lit the faded features. "Well, well," he said derisively. "My old pal. My buddy." The voice was harsh.

He began to speak, more to himself than to us, gazing uncertainly at his hand on the keyboard. "All these years she wrote to me . . . all the same, those letters . . . always full of the good things I should have when I finally got out. I was fool enough to believe them. I should have known. I lived on hope."

I was dimly aware of Fira sobbing softly in the room behind me.

"She was waiting for me in the hall when I arrived. She stood there like a bloomin' duchess, and she smiled, and asked me to come up to the sitting-room. And then"—he passed a hand over his face—"and then she began to laugh. Enough to freeze your blood, it was.

"She looked at me, then down at a bunch of flowers she was holding, and laughed. And then she told me. She told me that I should have nothing. She had brought me back to tell me that she despised me and always had. She told me to get out! Standing there, she looked just like her old man—

"I think she knew what I would do to her. I think she had been waiting for it. It was worth it to her—to die like that. Because she knew that I would hang for it—or whatever the custom is in this country."

Bill's hand found mine. I managed to say, "She loved you once. You destroyed her life."

"All's fair in love and war," he said, with a shaky sneer. Then he studied his fingertips for a moment. "She said a funny thing up there in that sitting-room. She said that if I had not told her forty years ago what I did, things would have been different."

"What did you tell her?"

"When they caught up with me, I told her the truth because I thought she would forget more easily. I told her I had never loved her at all. She wasn't my type."

No one said a word. Howard sighed and turned away from us.

The old man at the piano straightened up with a sort of senile bravado. For just an instant I caught a shadow of what he once might have been. "I should have known better than to come back. She's the only woman who ever got the better of me."

Bill's hand was tight on mine. I tried not to think of the woman sprawled across the chaise-longue upstairs. The old man's fingers touched a key of the piano, and then moved up a note.

Perhaps it was my imagination, but it sounded to me like the last and final notes of the waltz to which he had once danced beneath these very chandeliers, holding his bride in his arms.

★ ***The First Part of Ice Cold in Alex, by Christopher Landon, appears in next month's Argosy on sale September 7.***

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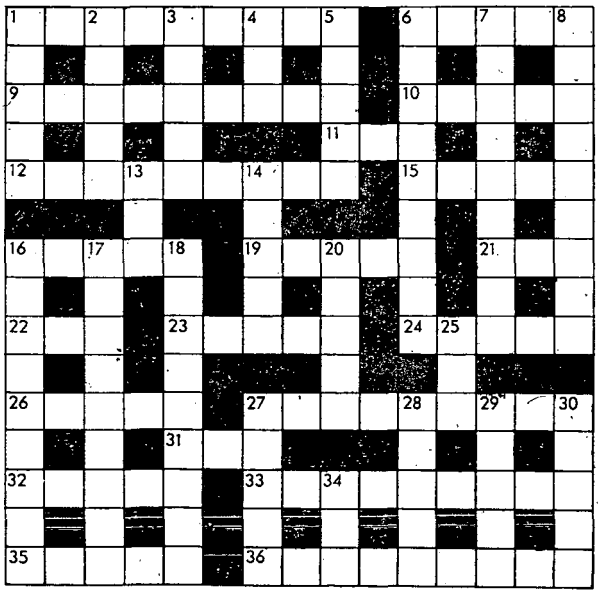
ARGOSY CROSS-WORD

★

Solution on Page 90

★



CLUES

Across

1 They're deep in the brass (4, 5).
6 "Warbling his —— lay" (Milton) (5).
9 Saving tea, it's plain sailing (9).
10 Revised fares (5).
11 In a ring makes a rough noise (3).
12 Dives wore it (4, 5).
15 National veg. (5).
16 One might be caught out on it (3, 2).
19 Mediterranean sailing vessel (5).
21 Falstaff's pal (3).
22 Common synonym for 29 (3).
23 Shifted trees (5).
24 Played in 22's (5).
26 Needed when taking a firm line ? (5).
27 The little bed's disparaged (9).
31 Elizabethan air (3).
32 Old golfer's ball (5).
33 Aids to good looks (3-6).
35 Such rivers sometimes run backwards (5).
36 Town with brilliant associations (9).

Down

1 Forbid fortissimo in Scotland (5).
2 The ages of man (5).
3 German philosopher (5).
4 Dry, it means trouble in the house (3).
5 She has America at heart (5).
6 Diana's in the first three (9).
7 The engineer seems better for the course (9).
8 Pupa (9).
13 Does it emulate the ostrich ? (3).
14 A Saxon would be quite at sea here (5).
16 Advice to the plagiarist ? (9).
17 Timetables are (9).
18 Likeness of a beam in the door (9).
20 Oriental chew (5).
25 "—— thou poor, yet hast thou golden slumbers ?" (3).
27 A billiard player would think it lucky (5).
28 How Browning's wise thrush sings (5).
29 Government operating from the bar ? (5).
30 Almost outdid us tyrants (5).
34 Timber found indoors in a pet (3).

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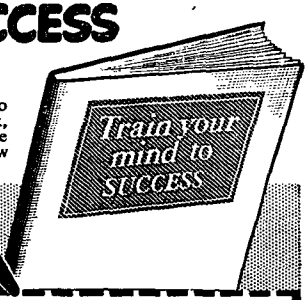

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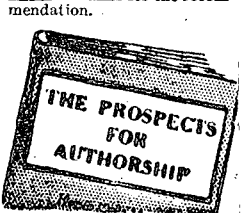

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